



Sword of the Demon Hunter

KUJIN
GENTOSHŌ

BOOK 1

BY Motoo Nakanishi



Table of Contents

[Copyrights and Credits](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Table of Contents Page](#)

[The Kadono Arc](#)

[Prologue: Transient Days](#)

[Man and Demon](#)

[Interlude: What Remains](#)

[Side Story: Embodiment of Jealousy](#)

[Footnotes](#)

[Newsletter](#)

Sword of the Demon Hunter Vol. 1

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First published by Futabasha Publishers Ltd., in 2019

English version published by Seven Seas Entertainment, Inc.

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ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold

PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-68579-332-6

Printed in Canada

First Printing: December 2022

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Seven Seas Entertainment



Table of Contents

KADONO ARC: TRANSIENT DAYS

PROLOGUE: *Transient Days*

Man and Demon

INTERLUDE: *What Remains*

SIDE STORY: *Embodiment of Jealousy*

The Kadono Arc

Prologue:

Transient Days

AMID TORRENTIAL RAIN, the man extended a hand to us and said, “If you have nowhere else to go, why not come stay at my place?”

I was only five then, yet I still remember it now. Unable to stand my father’s treatment of my younger sister, I’d taken her and fled Edo. I didn’t want us to live in a home like that anymore.

“...The rain’s only getting heavier,” I said.

“...Yeah.”

The rain poured, leaching our warmth and weighing down our bodies as we walked the night road side by side. It was too dark to see what lay ahead, and we were without umbrellas.

“I’m sorry, Suzune. I’m a failure of a brother.”

Suzune, my younger sister, hung her head sadly. Her hair had streaks of reddish-brown, and a bandage covered her right eye. Looking at her bandage dredged up bitter feelings. I hadn’t been able to protect her from our father. I’d tried my hardest, but in the end, our family shattered apart. Her bandage served as a painful reminder of my own ineptitude.

“It’s okay,” she said. “I’m happy as long as you’re by my side.”

We reached for each other’s hands, and my chest warmed as I felt her soft palm press against mine. Slowly, she broke into a genuine smile.

A pathetic older brother who couldn’t protect what was dear to him and a younger sister who beamed even while drenched in rain.

What did I think of her smile then, I wonder. I probably felt a myriad of emotions, too jumbled to put into words. The one thing I know for certain, however, was that her cherubic smile saved me in that moment.

So, I made a wish: *No matter what she may ultimately become, please, allow me to remain her older brother until the end.*

But I was only a child then. We might have left our home, but there was nowhere I could take her. We could only meander along the road leading away from Edo, without purpose or direction.

The rain grew heavier, then heavy enough to obscure what was before us. There was nowhere we could go, and no place we could return to. I was certain we would die on that road when we came across a man who looked to be in his mid-twenties. He wore a sedge hat and a slack kimono robe. Without bothering to ask if we were runaways, he said, "If you have nowhere else to go, why not come stay at my place?"

He was a stranger, and I was wary of him. I hid Suzune behind me and glared as fiercely as I could. But the man just smiled and said, "No need to glare. I'm nobody suspicious or anything, really."

I saw the sword at his waist and asked, "You're a samurai?"

"A shrine maiden guardian!" the man triumphantly replied. I had no clue what that was, but the man stated it so proudly that even my child mind understood it must be something grand. "So, what'll it be?" he continued. "Are you going to take me up on my offer or stay out here and bite the dust? Personally, I don't think you have much of a choice."

The man was right. There was no way we could survive on our own. It felt pathetic to admit, but it was foolish of me to leave home without a plan.

"Jinta..." Behind me, Suzune clutched the hem of my kimono robe, gazing fearfully at the stranger. She was afraid of men because they reminded her of our father, but we had no choice. As children, we had to rely on others to survive.

"Let's go with him, Suzune. It'll be okay. I'm with you," I said.

It was take this man's hand or die. The man sighed softly, perhaps sensing my reluctance, but he never dropped his kind gaze. I took his hand. His palm was firm and calloused.

"The name's Motoharu. And you, lad?" he asked. I understood the firmness of

his palm to be a reflection of his diligence, just as my father's own hands were always worn out from manning the shop. Something about that made me feel this man could be trusted.

Still, it was with some hesitancy that I answered, "...Jinta."

"And how old are you?"

"Five."

"You don't say? You're pretty levelheaded for your age. I take it that's your sister then? What's her name?"

"Suzune. She's a year younger than me."

"Is that right? I got a daughter of my own, actually. Same age. Maybe you all can be friends?"

Motoharu led me by the hand while I led Suzune by the hand, forming a chain. It was a strange sight that would've made any passerby do a double take, or so Motoharu joked.

We made for his village with him showing the way. I remember thinking that night that his rough palm felt just as gentle as Suzune's.

"We're here. This is Kadono."

After traveling the winding road, getting to the mountain, and traversing the wilderness, we arrived at Motoharu's home in a mountain village.

By then, more than a month had passed since we left Edo. With how casual his invitation was, I had expected his place to be far closer. We slept out in the open air many times along the way, often braving the elements just as we had that rainy night. I was exhausted from the journey. Suzune seemed fine, on the other hand, much to my chagrin.

I looked around through the rain that obstructed my view. There was a river nearby and a dense forest that continued beyond the village. In one area, buildings were packed messily together; in another, what seemed to be homes were sparsely set apart. It felt a bit disorderly. Perhaps because I had only known life in Edo, this place looked strange to me.

“Weird...” I heard Suzune say as she eyed our surroundings. She seemed to have reached the same conclusion as I did.

“Kadono ain’t weird at all. Though we are a small iron town, so you won’t find anything as exciting as in Edo,” Motoharu said.

“An iron town?” Suzune parroted.

“A town that makes iron. I’ll tell you more about that later. C’mon, this way.”

He led us to a wooden home that was much larger than its neighbors. “This is my place. Come on in.”

We followed him inside. From within, a young girl trotted towards us. Loudly, she called out, “Daddy, welcome home!”

Suzune stiffened in surprise. I stepped forward to protect her, a meaningless gesture. The young girl, presumably Motoharu’s daughter, leapt into her father’s arms.

“I’m home, Shirayuki. Have you been a good girl while I’ve been away?”

“Yeah!”

“That’s good, that’s good.”

The girl was slightly smaller than Suzune and had fair skin. Her lips curved into a soft smile as Motoharu patted her head. Motoharu’s own smile shone through his eyes. The two looked like a perfect family.

Suzune cast her gaze downwards, unable to bear the happy sight. Before her was something she could never have. Miserable tears began to well in her eyes, so I squeezed her small hand tight.

“Jinta...?” she said.

“It’ll be okay,” I said. If someone were to ask me *what* would be okay, I wouldn’t have been able to answer. But I held her hand tightly regardless.

“Don’t you worry.”

“...Okay.”

Her relieved voice, her returning squeeze of the hand, her mild warmth—it all made me want to smile, so I did. And she smiled back.

“Hm?” After talking to Motoharu for some time, the young girl finally noticed our presence, giving us a curious look. “Daddy, who are they?”

“A couple of children I picked up along the way,” Motoharu answered. He wasn’t wrong, but his answer only begged more questions. The young girl tilted her head, confused. Motoharu continued, “They’ll be living with us starting today.”

The young girl seemed bewildered by his sudden announcement. Of course, she would be. Anybody would be surprised—displeased even—to so unexpectedly learn that they would be living with strangers. She asked, “They’re going to live here?”

“That’s the plan. Are you all right with that?”

“...Yeah!”

The young girl seemed happy with the idea. This time, it was I who felt bewildered. How could she—and her father—be so accepting of us?

“U-um...” I tried to say something, but the words wouldn’t come out.

The young girl tottered over and peered directly at me. “I’m Shirayuki. What’s your name?”

“J-Jinta...” I felt nervous being so close to such a cute girl, especially one who was so close to my age. I couldn’t see it for myself, but my face was probably red.

Suzune latched on to my arm. She was terribly shy with strangers. I could feel her trembling through our connected palms.

“Hello. What’s your name?” Shirayuki asked.

“...Suzune,” my sister quietly replied, not managing a proper greeting. That seemed enough for Shirayuki, however, as she smiled broadly in return. I couldn’t believe it, but she was actually welcoming us.

“Nice to meet you,” Shirayuki said, extending a hand.

She was practically a mirror image of her father. The sight of her overlapped with the memory of Motoharu extending a hand in the rain, and I laughed a bit.

“Hm? What’s wrong?”

“Ha ha... No, it’s nothing. It’s nice to meet you too, Sh-Shira...yuki-chan...” I awkwardly stammered out her name.

She smiled slightly and shook her head. “You don’t need to add ‘-chan’ to my name,” she said, with a mature gentleness so unlike a child’s. “Because we’re family from now on.”

In hindsight, I probably fell for her smile then. That was how it all began. I was so happy to be called family by her. She probably had no idea how much those words meant to me, but it remained one of my treasured memories, even now. I was saved by my sister’s smile—and by hers. After losing everything, I regained a small amount of happiness that rainy night.

From that day on, Suzune and I lived with Motoharu. His wife, Yokaze, turned out to be a big shot in the village, and she and the village chief arranged for us to live in Kadono.

I felt indebted to Yokaze, although I hardly ever saw her. When I asked Motoharu why she didn’t live with us, he just grinned wryly and said, “She has to live at the shrine for her work.” I wanted to ask further, but the sad look on Shirayuki’s face made me think twice.

At any rate, Suzune and I began a new life in Kadono. Suzune was a bit timid at first, but over the course of three years, she opened up greatly and even played with children other than Shirayuki and me. There was a girl named Chitose, who was about four or five years old, and they often played together. Suzune would soon turn seven, but she looked young for her age, so the two were a good fit.

As for me...

“Darn it!”

“Ha ha, you won’t hit me by just swinging your blade willy-nilly!”

I swung my blade recklessly, and as hard as I could, but Motoharu parried it with little effort.

“Good luck, Jinta!” Shirayuki watched the two of us sparring with amusement.

This was the norm for us. Such scenes were daily occurrences since I’d come to live in Kadono. I’d asked Motoharu to train me in the sword. I never wanted to be as powerless as I was that rainy night. I wanted to become a man who could protect Suzune and Shirayuki if I needed to. I knew it was childish of me, but Motoharu didn’t say anything of the sort. He trained me every morning.

“C’mon! Get him!” cheered Shirayuki. Suzune was still asleep this early in the day, but Shirayuki always showed up to cheer me on.

I didn’t want to look pathetic, even if this was just training. I put all my willpower into my blows. Yet Motoharu still ran circles around me. My slash from the side was met with a block. My thrust, met with a dodge. My strike from above, met with a half-step retreat.

“Not bad. You’re getting pretty nimble, kid,” Motoharu said.

I stepped forward and swung with all my weight, yet he easily repelled me with his wooden sword. “But your swings are still wide.”

“Agh!” His return blow struck my head. He’d held back, but it still stung. I dropped my wooden sword and put my hand to my head, feeling a firm welt developing there.

The result was the same no matter how hard I tried. I’d yet to beat Motoharu in our training sessions.

“Ha ha, well, you tried your best,” Shirayuki said. As she approached, smiling, I quickly picked up my wooden sword and turned away. I had wanted to look cool with a bold swing but ended up even more embarrassed after being countered so easily.

“Quit it,” I said with a pout, as she patted my head with her small hand.

“There, there.” She smiled, fully aware I was just putting on a brave face. My thoughts were an open book to her. “Don’t worry, your big sister will cheer you up.”

“Huh? But I’m older than you.”

“Sure, but I’m more dependable than you. That means I’m your big sister!”

she insisted, with absolute confidence.

I didn't know what I could even say to that. I sighed and allowed her to keep patting me. It was embarrassing, but I couldn't deny that a part of me enjoyed it.

"Ha ha, you still got a ways to go before beating me, kid!" Motoharu said.

"It's not fair. You're way too strong, Motoharu!"

"Well, duh. I've been training longer than you." He watched Shirayuki comfort me with a tender smile. I glared at him with teary eyes, but he just laughed, tapping his wooden sword against his shoulder. Considering the way he usually acted, it was hard to believe that he was supposedly the greatest swordsman in the village. Appearances could be deceiving, I guess. "Don't be so down, though. Keep at it and you'll get better in time."

"I know...but I feel like I haven't improved at all since I began." Instead of becoming stronger, I felt like I hadn't changed one bit since I started training. I was nowhere near good enough to protect anyone. Sometimes I wondered whether what I was doing was pointless.

Perhaps sensing my worry, Motoharu chided me with a gentleness he rarely showed. "Listen up, Jinta. Nothing that exists is changeless. That includes you too. You might not feel it yourself, but you're improving, bit by bit. So, chin up. You will get stronger. I guarantee it."

"...Thanks." Just hearing it didn't change anything, but it eased my mind somewhat.

"Oh, I'd best be off to work soon. Let's leave it at this for today," Motoharu said, turning around with wooden sword still in his hand. The deal was that our daily training sessions would last until he had to go to work.

"Right. Thank you for today, Motoharu-san," I said.

"Don't worry 'bout it. I'm just doing what I want."

"Bye-bye, Dad!" Shirayuki said.

"Later. You be good now, you hear?"

He left without looking back. There wasn't a single bead of sweat on him. At

my skill level, I wasn't able to tire him at all.

Unconsciously, I gripped my wooden sword tightly with my left hand. I understood that I couldn't do anything about the gap between our skills, but it still frustrated me. "...Hey, Shirayuki?"

"Yes?"

"What does Motoharu-san do?" I asked. Despite living in Kadono, an iron-manufacturing village, I'd never seen him working the iron kiln bellows with the other men. Just what was his work?

"Dad's the shrine maiden guardian of Itsukihime," she answered.

I recalled that Motoharu had said something along those lines when we first met, but what did that mean?

Shirayuki continued, "And my mom's Itsukihime."

"Huh? Your mom's name is Yokaze...right?"

"Yeah. She's the shrine maiden of Mahiru-sama."

I'd met Yokaze once, although a bamboo screen had separated us. I was summoned to meet her after having spent some time in Kadono, and I talked to her for a bit. She was kind, and I could tell she was regarded with high esteem in the village. She'd said she was the shrine maiden of Mahiru-sama and taught me what that meant, but it was all a bit too difficult for me to make sense of back then.

Shirayuki looked absently off into the distance. She gazed to the north of the village, where a shrine stood on a small hill.

"Your mom's always at the shrine, right?" I asked.

"...Yeah. The only ones allowed to see her in person are the village chief and the shrine maiden guardian. Nobody else can meet with her because 'worldly people will taint the purity of Itsukihime,' whatever that means. Dad's the shrine maiden guardian, so he sees her every day, but I haven't seen her in years."

Shirayuki laughed lightly, but her eyes seemed heavy with loneliness. I finally began to understand why Yokaze accepted Suzune and me so willingly.

Shirayuki hadn't met her mother once in the three years we'd been here, and likely hadn't seen her for many years before we came. I didn't quite understand what a shrine maiden guardian was, but I understood Motoharu could see Yokaze every day, while Shirayuki never could. Being a young child, she probably missed her mother and felt it unfair she was left out. So, she wished for more family to make up for it.

For the first time ever, I saw how vulnerable the girl who saved me could be. I said, "It'll be all right. I'm with you."

"Huh?"

"I'll be with you, always." I couldn't tell her I'd banish her loneliness. I wasn't conceited enough to think I could erase what she felt. But I wanted to stay by her side. Even if there wasn't anything I could do for her, I wanted to at least make sure she didn't suffer alone.

"What the heck?" she asked, giggling.

"...You don't have to laugh," I said with a blush.

"How can I not?"

In hindsight, what I'd said was pretty stupid...but I wouldn't take it back. It was a hundred times worse to take back something you meant.

"Jinta." Shirayuki looked me straight in the eye. My heart leaped in surprise. Her clear black pupils seemed to see straight through me and into my soul.

"Thank you."

She felt so transitory in that moment, like a candle flame about to falter and vanish. Her usual spirited self was gone, as was the air of dependability she always had. I had to say something. Something to make her feel better. I ventured, "Um, Shirayuki... I—"

"Jinta?"

"Whoa!"

My words of comfort never made it out. All of a sudden, a young girl with a bandage over her right eye and hair streaked reddish-brown appeared next to me. I stammered, "O-oh, Suzune."

“Good morning, Jinta,” she said with a sweet, sunny smile, oblivious to my racing heart, still going a mile a minute. I had almost said something incredibly uncool in front of my own younger sister.

“What were you about to say?” Shirayuki asked with a knowing, impish grin.

“Nothing!” I raised my voice in embarrassment. I couldn’t even defeat Shirayuki, never mind Motoharu.

“Jinta, what’s wrong?” Suzune asked, thinking I was angry. She pressed a finger to her lip in wonder.

Shirayuki’s grin widened, amused by Suzune’s actions. “Don’t worry about it, Suzune,” she said. “Let’s go eat something, then play.”

“Mmm...okay! What’re we doing today?” Suzune asked.

“How about we explore the Irazu Forest?”

Although the two looked nothing alike, seeing them chatter together like this made me think they could pass for sisters. That made me happy but somehow also a little sad. How nice it would be if they were sisters for real.

“You’re all right with that too, right, Jinta?” Shirayuki asked.

“What if I said I wasn’t?”

“Then I guess we’d just have to drag you along.”

It appeared I didn’t have a say in the matter. But that was as expected. I consented to the plan, and the two beamed.

“Shall we go, then?” Shirayuki said.

“Let’s go!” Suzune said.

The two held out their hands, wearing those same smiles that had once saved me. Since I was holding my wooden sword, I could only take one of their hands.

Without much thought, I made my choice.

Her palm was small and warm. I put a little strength into my grip, not enough to hurt but enough to make my hold true.

“Yeah, let’s go.”

We smiled as three and ran off.

It was a morning like any other. The warmth of her hand felt so real then. I didn't yet know it would one day leave me.

A memory from the time when I was still "Jinta," she was still "Shirayuki," and Suzune was still "Suzune."

...I remember it even now.

When I was young, I asked Motoharu to teach me the way of the sword. He was strong; I never did end up landing a strike against him. Shirayuki would watch and cheer me on, then console me when I inevitably lost. Afterwards, we would go play. My younger sister would join us, having finally woken up just in time to decide what we'd do for the day.

We were a real family, then. But the years sped past, and our happy days were gone in the blink of an eye. What was once everyday life became but a memory that gradually faded. I grew taller, and my voice lowered. I took on more responsibilities and became unable to play like I once could. Even my speech grew more reserved.

But even now, occasionally, ever so occasionally, I reflected on those happy, heart-warming days of my youth. And when I did, I wondered about the decision I made back then. I held a wooden sword, so I could only take one of their hands. If I had taken the other hand that day, what would have become of the three of us? Would things have been different now?

Sometimes I found myself dreaming of what could have been. But I'd soon realize it was meaningless and cut myself short. No matter what regrets I might have, it was too late to change the path I'd chosen for myself. And as long as I couldn't change my path, there was no sense in entertaining what-ifs. All I had left was the fragmented way of life I clung to, and this blade that I couldn't abandon.

With a pop, our transient days burst like bubbles along the water's surface.

Man and Demon

1

IT WAS A NIGHT with a cool breeze near the end of spring. Scattered petals danced through the air, and fresh buds adorned the sides of the road with verdant green. The maiden leaves of early-summer cherry blossom trees, petals freshly strewn, displayed a divine beauty Mother Nature rarely brought to light. A night like this—where the fresh foliage had only just supplanted the light pink and the sky hung just a little heavier—felt ever-so slightly of summer, save for the wind that dashed through the leaves with spring’s residual chill.

The branches swayed, scents wafted clear, and a curtain of stars presented themselves above. By all means, it should have been a pleasant night. But the chill of the wind dashed it all. The night felt of metal, cold and stiff to the touch.

On this leaden night, a young man waited alone. He leaned against a cherry blossom tree, his fierce glare trained on the twilight ahead. Nearby, along the road, stood a solitary milestone marking the distance to Edo.

The young man’s name was Jinta. Despite being only eighteen years of age, he sported an impressive height at six shaku¹ a full head taller than the average grown man. The body under his pale blue-green kimono robe was well tempered, and a two-shaku, six-sun² length sword hung at his waist in an iron scabbard, sharp as the air he exuded.

“Excuse me,” a voice called from the road.

Jinta glanced sideways and saw a young woman standing nearby.

“Might you know the way to Kadono?” she asked with a carefree smile. Her smile was bewitching, uncannily so for someone of her apparent age.

“I do. That happens to be the village I’m from,” Jinta replied in an emotionless voice, cold and stiff like lead.

The woman fluttered her eyes with relief. “Oh, I had hoped so. Would you be willing to show me the way?”

“That depends. What business do you have there?” he asked, stepping forth. Slowly enough that she wouldn’t notice, he braced his center of gravity. His left hand already gripped the object at his waist.

“I have an older sister who married and moved to Kadono. I was hoping to visit her.”

“...I see.” He stepped swiftly forward and to the right, closing the distance between him and the woman. Both his feet dug into the earth, and he showed no hesitation as he drew from his scabbard and sliced upwards and across the woman’s body in one fluid motion.

“Gagh...?” Fresh blood and air spat from her mouth. A naked blade had cut her body.

To a bystander, this might have appeared to be a random act of violence, but there was more to it than that. In an unfazed, leaden voice, Jinta spat, “Your human guise was almost perfect. But your eyes remain red...*demon*.”

There existed a number of ways to distinguish humans from demonkind, but the simplest was through the color of their eyes. Demon eyes were almost always red. Powerful demons could conceal their demon eyes when disguised as humans, but such a feat was remarkably difficult for the weaker ones.

The woman’s red eyes were proof she was not of humankind but a spirit.

“Y-you bastard!” Her face lost all trace of humanity as her eyes glared at Jinta, full of hatred. Her body swelled, and her muscles bulged abnormally. Her skin turned a pale blue. She was trying to revert to her demon form—but it was too late.

Jinta kicked off the earth with his left leg and swung down on her neck for the finishing blow. This time, the demon didn’t even have time to groan. It fell dead to the ground, halfway between its human and grotesque demon form. A white vapor rose from the corpse, more steam than smoke, as the body faded away like melting ice. Jinta watched the demon go, feeling nothing. He flicked the blood off his sword and slowly slid it back into its scabbard.

As the sword guard hit his scabbard with a dull *clink*, the demon corpse vanished completely. Thinking nothing further of it, Jinta began to walk along

the road. He still had some distance to cover before reaching Kadono.

It was year eleven of the Tenpo Era (1840 AD), a period of repeated floods and frozen crops. Great famines occurred in the Mutsu and Dewa provinces, and many people lost their lives before conditions improved. The people of the Rising Sun suffered greatly, and many had their spirits broken. And when spirits broke, demons had free reign to run rampant. Occasionally, a demon would find its way into human settlements and deceive them for sport.

Kadono was a village in the mountains about 130 ri³ from Edo, a month's journey on foot. Since the days of old, it had flourished as an iron town, thanks to the high-quality iron sand deposits gracing the Modori River that flowed nearby. Kadono also boasted some of the most distinguished metallurgists in the country. Swordsmiths all over said that Kadono swords were "swords capable of rending even demons."

The north side of Kadono was elevated on a hill. As it was safe from river floods, a red-lacquered shrine had been built there, clearly of a grander make than the other homes and buildings in the village. Day and night, the shrine housed Itsukihime, the shrine maiden tasked with offering prayers to Kadono's native god.

Kadono subsisted on iron production. As fire was essential to ironmaking, a deity of fire naturally became Kadono's object of worship. This deity was a goddess known as Mahiru-sama. It was believed she governed over fire, kept the kilns of Kadono ever-burning, and brought prosperity to the village.

The shine maiden Itsukihime was revered as the one who offered prayers to Mahiru-sama of the iron-birthing fire. The "hime" in Itsukihime was widely understood as "princess" (hime), but in Kadono it took on the secondary meaning of "Woman of Fire" (which was also hime).

In the distant past, the people of Kadono saw the shrine maiden of the motherly flame as the fire goddess herself. That faith didn't run so deep now in the Tenpo Era, but Itsukihime still remained in the shrine away from the eyes of

world. The Woman of Fire never set foot outside the shrine and kept herself hidden behind a bamboo screen, remaining the holy subject of the village's worship to this day.

"Jinta, you have done well to defend Kadono from demons yet again." The current Itsukihime, a woman by the name of Byakuya, spoke in a soft voice from the other side of the bamboo screen. Her face was hidden, but her silhouette nodded proudly.

Although it was early summer, the floorboards of the shrine felt chilly. Sitting on the floorboards between Jinta and the bamboo screen were the village chief, a young man by the village chief's side, the head of the blacksmiths, the representative of the metallurgists, and a number of other influential figures of the village.

"It was nothing at all," Jinta replied. He had come to make a report after slaying the demon.

"Few can hold their own against these man-eating spirits. You should be more proud of your ability," Itsukihime said.

"I am simply fulfilling my duty as shrine maiden guardian."

No matter how many demons he slew, Jinta always gave this same dry reply. He didn't say it out of modesty but out of a genuine belief that what he did meant little. Jinta was one of the few men in Kadono who didn't have a hand in the ironmaking business, since he was one of the village's two shrine maiden guardians.

A shrine maiden guardian was just what it sounded like—a guardian to Itsukihime. Normally, only samurai had the right to bear swords, but Kadono was given a special governmental exception and could select shrine maiden guardians who could bear swords, as well as speak to Itsukihime without a bamboo blind separating them.

Outside of protecting Itsukihime, shrine maiden guardians were also tasked with the role of demon hunter. In these times, when the only light at night was that of the stars and moon, the supernatural would take form and threaten the

living. Just as there were doctors to fight disease and firemen to fight fire, there were those tasked with fighting the supernatural. Such were the demon hunters, those who fought the inhuman threats to the village.

Itsukihime prayed for the prosperity of the village, and her guardians protected the village. In a sense, the guardians of the shrine maiden were the guardians of the village as well.

“C’mon now, a shrine maiden guardian mustn’t be so modest! I doubt even Edo has anyone as skilled with the sword as you. Be proud!” the head of the blacksmiths said with a hearty laugh.

“...But I have no worth as a man of Kadono.” Despite the praise, Jinta’s expression was gloomy. As a shrine maiden guardian, he had no need to engage in ironmaking and ironworking, though it was also true he had little aptitude as artisan in the first place. He earned his current position through his skill with the sword and Byakuya’s final word, but if he hadn’t been a guardian, then he’d have likely been dead weight to the village. That truth prevented him from feeling any pride in his duties, no matter how much praise he received or how many demons he slayed.

He did feel some pride in his position as shrine maiden guardian, but it was overshadowed by his longing for the work of the ironmakers and the blacksmiths. He could only end life, not create like his Kadono fellows could. Because of that, he came to harbor a deep-rooted sense of inferiority.

“What’s that matter, eh? You’ll always have us around to make swords for ya.”

“Just as you may not be able to smith a demon-killing sword, we lack the swordsmanship to kill demons. It all works out this way.”

Jinta thanked the craftsmen with a deep bow. His gratitude was genuine and appealed to their own pride. There was great honor in being a shrine maiden guardian. Though Jinta spoke politely to the men present as though he were of a lower status, in truth, his place in the village was below only that of the village chief and Itsukihime. That was why most regarded him respectfully, and why many went out of their way to use honorifics when speaking his name.

Of course, respect often brought jealousy with it, and the older one was, the

plainer jealousy stood. The influential figures of the village had a bitter pill to swallow when a youth of dubious origin surpassed them in status. But it was also a fact that this youth was skilled with the sword, had killed a number of demons, envied their trades, and treated them with respect. The men felt content with his competence and attitude, so they accepted him as shrine maiden guardian. As strange as it was, Jinta's inferiority complex worked to his benefit.

"What kind of demon was it this time?" Byakuya asked, perhaps sensing Jinta's eagerness to move things along.

Realizing that she was helping him, Jinta forced his spirits back up and confidently stated, "One taking the form of a human to try and sneak into Kadono."

Up in the mountain recesses, the threat of the supernatural was very real. There were all kinds of demons, mountain witches, Tengu, and Hihi monkey beasts, to name a few spirits. The men in the shrine stiffened and listened raptly.

After a short silence passed, the village chief spoke up for the first time during the meeting. "Hmm... They must've been after the princess, then."

Someone swallowed audibly. A nervous air filled the shrine.

The natural life span of a demon surpassed a thousand years, but it was said they could obtain true immortality by eating the fresh liver of a shrine maiden. Many accounts in legends and folktales supported this, but whether it was true or not was beyond knowing. Still, there were undoubtedly demons who acted on the knowledge. In fact, the previous Itsukihime, Yokaze, was devoured by a demon some years ago. Her shrine maiden guardian, Motoharu, lost his life protecting her. Remembering that tragedy now had the men perturbed.

"The princess, eh..."

"Yeah, the demons would be after her..."

Worried voices murmured, overlapping. Itsukihime was their connection to Mahiru-sama. The Woman of Fire was their object of worship, their spiritual pillar. The idea that she could be targeted was unsettling, to say the least.

“Or perhaps they’re after Yarai?” Byakuya said calmly. Her tone of composure brought the men some ease. “The demons might find some value in the treasured blade passed down through generations of Itsukihime.”

“Hmm...” The village chief’s brow knit with doubt.

Yarai was a sacred sword that was kept within the shrine. It was a long sword passed down since the Warring States period and was a symbol of the Goddess of Fire herself. By tradition, as caretaker of Yarai, Itsukihime would take the “ya” kanji of the sword’s name, meaning “night,” and change her own name to include it as “ya” or “yo.” Such was how the current Itsukihime came to be called Byakuya.

“Yarai is the best sword Kadono’s ever forged. After a thousand years it has never rusted and is even believed to harbor a soul. You think the demons might be after its power?” the village chief asked.

“I do,” Byakuya replied.

The village chief’s face crumpled. His eyes narrowed sharply in deep thought. He scratched his chin with his left hand and nodded. “I see. But the fact remains that you might be a target yourself, Princess. Please, do not forget that.”

“Yes...of course.” There was some strain in her reply. Yet it wasn’t caused by fear of the demons but rather something closer to confusion. Even with her face obscured, Jinta could tell she had stiffened momentarily.

Regardless, the village chief went on. With his years of experience, he likely noticed her hesitation as well but acted as though he hadn’t. “As long as you understand. Kadono cannot stand without you, Itsukihime—you are our pillar. And as village chief, it is my duty to think of the village’s future. So do forgive me for my occasional strictness.”

“...I understand.”

This might have seemed rude on the surface, but the chief’s devotion to the village was genuine. He wished for Kadono’s peace and prosperity, and everyone understood that. Hence, Byakuya did not admonish him for his tone.

“Jinta,” said the village chief, pausing to lock his gaze on the young man. “There will likely be more demons after our treasures, the princess and Yarai. I

ask you to continue to fulfill your duty as shrine maiden guardian.”

“But of course,” Jinta replied. He felt a bit irked by the village chief’s attitude towards Byakuya but respected her decision to let it slide. His reply and meek demeanor seemed to please the village chief, who nodded briefly in reply.

Just as things seemed to be wrapping up, a snide remark came from out of the blue: “Right, because that’s all you’re good for anyway.”

The ridicule came from the young man by the village chief’s side. He was a head shorter than Jinta, and his handsome face was ruined by the disagreeable smirk smeared across it. His name was Kiyomasa, and he was the other shrine maiden guardian of the village. His position wasn’t chosen by Byakuya, however, but had been forced through by the village chief half a year prior.

Kiyomasa was the village chief’s only son, born when the chief was already getting on in years. As the future chief, Kiyomasa had a proper education, but his skill with the sword was lacking. For that reason, he was not appointed a demon hunter, despite his status as a shrine maiden guardian. At best, he was tasked with guarding the shrine when Jinta was away from Kadono or otherwise indisposed. It was questionable whether he should have been a shrine maiden guardian at all. Many agreed his position was only thanks to his father’s doting nature, though none ever expressed such thoughts to the village chief openly.

“What do you mean to say?” Jinta said, glaring. Kiyomasa seemed unfazed and kept up his snide attitude. They were colleagues, but in no way did they get along. Ever since Kiyomasa became shrine maiden guardian, he’d been antagonistic to Jinta, and Jinta didn’t bother hiding his lack of respect for someone who rode his father’s coattails.

“Don’t act like you don’t understand. I’m saying the only thing you’re good for is swinging that sword around,” Kiyomasa said cynically.

Jinta didn’t bother arguing—or he couldn’t, rather. Kiyomasa’s insult was precisely how Jinta felt about himself. He understood full well that his only worth was in killing. So he let Kiyomasa’s words slide, saying, “You’re right. All the more reason to swing it for the princess’s sake.”

“...Tsk, you’re no fun,” Kiyomasa said, clicking his tongue. His brows furrowed, irked that his provocation had gone unmet. Jinta hid it well, but he was put off

by Kiyomasa's behavior. A hostile silence ensued, making everyone uncomfortable.

"Is it wise to quarrel before the Goddess?" Byakuya's soft reprimand broke the silence. "Jinta, Kiyomasa, a shrine maiden guardian exists not only to protect me but the villagers as well. If you two fight, then the villagers will grow anxious."

"...It is as you say. Forgive me," Jinta said, lowering his head. The silhouette beyond the bamboo screen moved a bit, likely pleased with his straightforward response,

"And you as well, Kiyomasa," she said.

"Huh, you want me to apologize too?" the young man said.

"Of course. You are a shrine maiden guardian as well."

"I mean, c'mon, you know that's in name only... It's not like I do anything but guard you," he grumbled.

A small sigh escaped Byakuya, exasperated with his rudeness. "You never change."

"Yeah, and don't expect me to. I don't change how I talk for anyone."

"I'm well aware. But your needless comments are what began this quarrel. From now on, plea—"

"Yeah, yeah, watch what I say, I got it," he said, cutting her off.

As the son of the village chief, few could rebuke Kiyomasa for his behavior. Still, Byakuya wasn't bothered by his attitude. If anything, she found it enjoyable. Her stiff voice had softened up at some point. Jinta felt a faint ache watching their exchange. They clearly had some kind of closeness, but perhaps that was to be expected, with Kiyomasa being a shrine maiden guardian and all. Still, the ache remained.

"Kiyomasa should really be punished for speaking out of turn, but I have nothing to say if the princess is willing to overlook things," the village chief said. He was typically as strict as they came but turned soft when it came to his son. Instead of rebuking Kiyomasa as he should, he smiled gently, as though he

found his son's antics charming. But soon he stiffened and gave the men a serious look. "It seems we're settled for today. Jinta, stay here and protect the princess. Everyone else, return to your posts."

Everyone obeyed, bowing to Byakuya and leaving the shrine. Kiyomasa stopped and glared at Jinta for a moment but left without saying anything. Only Jinta remained on his side of the bamboo screen.

"Are you alone now?" Byakuya asked. With the shrine now quiet again, her voice carried well.

"Yes. Everyone has taken their leave but me," Jinta answered.

A soft sound came from behind the bamboo screen. Jinta looked at her silhouette and saw that she had stood up. She appeared to look around, checking her surroundings before pressing a hand against the bamboo screen. "It should be all right to come out then, yeah?" she said as she came fully into view.

Beautiful black hair streamed down to her waist. Youthful, slightly droopy eyes peered out from a slender face. Her skin was pale white, perhaps because she hadn't left the shrine in so long, and her thin body resembled porcelain with its fragility. She wore the red hakama of a shrine maiden with a white haori over it, and gold trinkets adorned her body. Slowly, she walked towards Jinta.

"Princess?" he said, to no response. Before he could ask what she wanted, she stopped before him, bent down, and pinched his cheeks.

"*Mh, pwincess?*" he questioned in a voice one would never expect from a swordsman who'd sent so many demons to their graves. But he couldn't defy Itsukihime, the one he was bound to protect, so he allowed her to pinch and stretch his cheeks.

After playing around for a few moments, she gave one last good tug before releasing him. "I can't believe I have to say this every time, but you can drop the formalities already, you know?" she said. The pure, sacred shrine maiden was gone, replaced by an ordinary young girl.

"But...we have our positions to consider," he said, hesitantly. "And I don't think that behavior was very becoming of you just now, Princess. Er, I mean in

terms of being a lady, not a shrine maiden.”

“There you go with that ‘Princess’ stuff again. How many times do I gotta tell you to address me like you used to when we’re alone?”

“But...”

Though Itsukihime was no longer thought of as the Goddess herself, as she had been in the past, not even the likes of a shrine maiden guardian could be discourteous to her.

Even so, she continued to insist. “...Look, I get why you’re so reluctant. But it should be fine when we’re alone. C’mon... You’re the only one who’ll still use that name for me anymore.”

He was about to protest further but stopped when he saw the look on her face. She smiled, but her eyes betrayed a deep loneliness within. It was a loneliness he had seen before, which was why he understood he couldn’t deal with it as a shrine maiden guardian. “Shirayuki,” he said, using the old name of his childhood friend.

She froze for a moment, but as the word sank in, she broke into a smile.

“I’m sorry, Shirayuki. I shouldn’t have been so obstinate,” he said.

“No, I’m sorry for being so selfish.”

His voice was still monotone and dispassionate, but she allowed it. Over time, his way of speaking had grown formal and stiff. But the one thing that didn’t change was how he always caved to her selfish whims. Happily, she closed her eyes and basked in the nostalgia.

“Say it again.”

“Shirayuki.”

“...Ah.”

Their meaningless exchange of words lightened the atmosphere. Her earlier sadness faded, replaced by a smile tinged with something close to homesickness.

It was hard to believe thirteen years had passed. Jinta had left Edo with his

sister when he was five. The two then met Motoharu, the previous shrine maiden guardian, who gave them a place to stay in his own home in Kadono. Jinta met Shirayuki—Motoharu’s daughter—during that time, and the two had been practically inseparable ever since, even living under the same roof.

But eight years ago, Yokaze, the previous shrine maiden, lost her life, and Shirayuki, Yokaze’s daughter, became the next Itsukihime and took on a new name, as was tradition for those who looked after the sacred sword Yarai. The carefree Shirayuki became Byakuya⁴ and devoted herself to praying for Kadono’s prosperity as Itsukihime.

“I’m so pathetic,” she said. “Even though I made my choice and became Itsukihime, I still depend on you like this.”

“What’s wrong with that? I’m your shrine maiden guardian. It’s my job to be depended on.”

“...Yeah, I guess you’re right. Thank you.” Her bashful look reminded Jinta of her younger self. Shirayuki had become Itsukihime, but the girl she once was hadn’t disappeared completely. That was why she wanted him to treat her as he once had when they were alone. Talking to an old friend was one of the few ways she could let loose now that she was cut off from the earthly world.

“Well done slaying that demon, by the way. I’m sorry we’re always pushing everything onto you,” she said.

“Not at all. A demon of that level is nothing. Besides...” he trailed off.

“Hm?”

“No, it’s nothing.” Out of embarrassment, he stopped himself from saying, *I became a shrine maiden guardian to protect you, anyway.*

But even though he didn’t say it, his feelings were crystal clear. “Jeez, Jinta. You want your big sister to dote on you that badly?” she said, making no effort to hide her beaming smile as she tousled his hair.

“Oh, please. How are you supposed to be my big sister when I’m older than you? And quit rubbing my head.”

“What do you mean? We’re only a year apart, and I’m more dependable than

you. That makes me your big sister!”

“Dependable, huh? Who was the one who kept insisting she’d become a shrine maiden *guardian* to their father again? And the one who almost drowned in the river trying to catch a fish? Don’t even get me started on that time you went exploring in the Irazu Forest with Suzune, got lost, and cried. You *sure* are dependable.”

“Why do you gotta remember only the bad stuff...?”

“That’s all you’ve given me to work with,” he joked.

Jinta smiled nostalgically as he reflected on the past. Without a doubt they had been happy then, back before they were bound by their positions. Not to say that the present was without joy, but he sometimes had to wonder: If the days of their youth had continued uninterrupted, where would they be today? For a moment, he imagined what could have been, but then realized it was meaningless and stopped himself short. It was Shirayuki’s own decision to become Itsukihime, and Jinta had chosen to respect that by becoming a shrine maiden guardian. To entertain what-ifs would be to spit on both their choices. There was no point in speculating about what could have been.

“Oh yeah, Suzu-chan’s here,” Byakuya said. Her words pulled Jinta back to reality, but it took a moment for him to process what she’d said as she turned and walked back to the bamboo screen.

“...What? But the shrine’s supposed to be off-limits,” he said.

“Yeah, it’s a mystery how she got in. Especially with people watching out front.” She stepped into the rear of the shrine, laid with tatami mats, and beckoned Jinta to follow. As he stepped through the bamboo screen, the first thing he saw was the small, simple altar. On either side, a vase held sakaki tree branches, and a candle was set out. In the middle was a single enshrined sword—the sacred sword Yarai. It was kept in an iron scabbard and, being a long tachi blade, had an impressive length of two-shaku and eight-sun. It was said it hadn’t rusted at all over the past thousand years, making people believe a soul dwelled in it. However, despite being an object of worship, there were no frivolous decorations on it; in fact, with its simple metal scabbard, it even felt a bit plain. But perhaps plainness was the ideal impression for a sword to give. It

lent the shrine—and the Goddess it represented, Mahiru-sama—a sense of solemnity.

“Zzz...”

But before that solemn, sacred sword, a most foolish girl slept quietly. It was a wonder she dared to be in this forbidden area, despite the influential figures of the village holding a meeting next to it mere moments ago. Her hair had streaks of reddish-brown, and a bandage hid her right eye. She looked to be about six or seven years of age and was sleeping comfortably. This was Suzune, the girl Jinta left Edo with—and his younger sister.

Seeing her sleeping so peacefully, he could only sigh in exasperation and exclaim, “This girl... I’m surprised nobody noticed her.” Only the village chief and the shrine maiden guardians were allowed to see Itsukihime directly. If someone had spotted Suzune, she could be killed for blasphemy against Itsukihime. Her carelessness was enough to make his head hurt.

“Aw, don’t be so mean. She came to see you, you know?” Byakuya said.

“Me?”

“Yeah, she wanted to see you as soon as possible, since you’ve been gone for two days.”

Hearing that calmed him a bit. He had been away from Kadono for two days carrying out his demon-hunting duties. In the past, he and Suzune lived with Shirayuki and Motoharu, but now the two lived alone. It was no surprise that Suzune would get lonely when he was gone.

“Suzu-chan’s still young. She couldn’t bear waiting until you returned home,” Byakuya said.

“But that doesn’t make it okay for her to break the rules.”

“I, at the very least, don’t mind her visiting...” she grumbled, knowing full well she couldn’t convince him. The three had been inseparable in their youth, but now Byakuya spent her days alone in the shrine. It was the path she’d chosen for herself, so she didn’t regret it. But a small part of her still wavered.

“I’m kidding, of course,” she said, sticking her tongue out. Her intent was clear

to Jinta: "Let's pretend you didn't hear that," which he graciously did.

"Should we wake her up?" he asked.

"Yeah. Thanks." An odd reply perhaps, but he understood what she meant.

He bent over and gave Suzune's shoulder a shake. "Suzune, wake up."

Suzune quietly groaned and rolled over. Her sleep must have been light, for that small shake was enough to rouse her. "Mgh... Jinta! Good morning," she said, breaking into a smile as soon as she opened her eyes and saw him. She slowly stood, looked up at him with wet eyes, and added, "And welcome back!"

Two days must have felt like an eternity to the girl. Jinta couldn't bring himself to reprimand her after realizing that. "Yeah. I'm back." He patted her head, and she squirmed ticklishly. Her innocence made him forget, for a moment, that they were in a shrine, and his stiff, leaden demeanor eased.

"You're so soft when it comes to Suzu-chan," Byakuya teased.

"I try to be strict sometimes," he said.

"Yeah right. You've *always* been soft on her, since a long time ago."

She was probably right, but the only family Suzune and he had were each other, so he couldn't help it.

"Not that that's a bad thing," Byakuya continued, "but I wish you'd share some of that sweetness with me too."

"Ha ha, all right. I'll try to." His lips formed a smile unbidden at Byakuya's childish teasing. He looked back to Suzune and locked eyes with her. All the frustration he had felt was gone, but he still had to remind her not to sneak into the shrine. "Suzune. I've told you many times already that you're not supposed to be in here."

"Whaaat. But you come in all the time," she complained.

"That's because I'm a shrine maiden guardian."

"I know, I know," she said with a pout. "And because the princess is your cru—"

Jinta quickly put his hand over her mouth to shut her up. *That was close. A*

little more and she would have spilled the beans.

“Huh? What was that about me?” With a blush and a wide grin, Byakuya leered at Jinta. His feelings were as plain as day to her, but he was still too embarrassed to say them out loud.

“Nothing,” he protested, blushing as well. He knew full well she *knew*, but he still wanted to protect what little pride he had.

Byakuya burst into laughter. “Oh, Jinta... Jinta, Jinta, Jinta.”

“Jinta’s so shy!” Suzune said.

“That he is,” Byakuya agreed.

The two looked at one another and giggled. Jinta thought it strange how his reprimanding of Suzune had somehow turned around on him, but continued. “*Ahem*. Like I was saying, be more careful, okay? For your own sake.”

“Okaaaay,” Suzune replied, but Jinta had a feeling he’d catch her sneaking in again soon enough.

Perhaps reading his mind, Byakuya teased, “Being a big brother’s tough, huh?”

It was. With a wry grin, Jinta thought to himself, *But it’s not all bad*, and he sighed.

The shrine was filled with a joy it usually never saw. Jinta’s face naturally softened as he looked at them, like he had been thrust back into the warm, easy days of their youth. But an indescribable pang of sadness flashed through his chest. They might be smiling in the present moment, but Byakuya couldn’t leave the shrine and live like a woman her age should. She was stuck in there to protect her sanctity but at the cost of a normal life. Just how lonely was she?

He tried to imagine her solitude but immediately quashed the thought as it rose up. He couldn’t pity her. He *mustn’t* pity her. Byakuya—no, Shirayuki had made her choice. Long ago, she had sworn an unsteady yet heartfelt vow to be the strength, the pillar of Kadono, as her mother had before her. And he in turn had sworn to protect it out of admiration for its beauty. So he *mustn’t* pity her. To do so would be to trample over all the determination that had brought her

to this point.

Still, he wanted her to find peace, at the very least. That was partly why he became a shrine maiden guardian in the first place—for the sake of a childhood friend who gave up her own happiness and her youthful but earnest vow. And for the precious world she made here, he could continue to wield his blade.

“...I think I’ll head home now.” Suzune glanced sideways at Jinta with a slight frown.

“Already? You should stay a little longer. We rarely ever get to meet like this,” Byakuya said.

“No, I should go. It’d be bad if I got caught, and I just wanted to see Jinta.” Suzune’s eyes crinkled, as though she were wiser than her apparent years suggested. However, in the next moment she broke into a childlike grin and said, “Later, Jinta! Don’t stay out for too long!”

“Wait, let me come with you. You’ll get caught if you go alone,” he said.

“I’ll be fine. I have the secret path I used to get here! Bye-bye, Princess!” She fixed the bandage over her right eye and trotted towards the entrance, only stopping once to turn around and wave before leaving the shrine.

Jinta watched her go with some lingering worry and said, “She’s trying to be considerate of us, huh?” Suzune was very obviously trying to give the two some time alone together. Realizing that even his still-young sister could see right through him, and even went out of her way to give them space, Jinta felt a bit pathetic.

With a soft, happy sigh, Byakuya said, “She’s such a good girl.”

He felt the same way but was hung up on one thing. “Personally, I’d be happier if she were a little more independent.”

“You think she’s pushing herself?”

“I do.” Suzune had difficulty talking to people other than Jinta and Byakuya and didn’t leave the house except to run the rare errand. Perhaps that was why she felt she couldn’t inconvenience them both. As her brother, Jinta was worried for her.

“I had to scold her because it’s against the rules, but really, it’d be nice if she were allowed to play here at the shrine,” Jinta said. He would almost certainly die before Suzune’s time came, leaving her on her own. Ideally, she would turn to Byakuya then, but that would never be allowed so long as the rules forbade it.

“You’ve put some thought into this. I’m surprised,” Byakuya said.

“Of course I have. I’m her older brother, after all. It’s only natural for me to think of my younger sister’s happiness.”

“Ha ha, I see. It must be rough being a big brother.”

Byakuya always acted as though she were older than him, but her tender voice in that moment truly did feel like that of an older sister’s. Jinta awkwardly averted his gaze. Aware of how bashful he felt, she giggled until she had tears in her eyes and then calmed down.

After that, they spoke together casually, just small talk. But their peace was broken by the sound of the wooden floorboards creaking.

“Quiet. Somebody’s here,” she said.

Their relaxing time together came to an end. Byakuya quickly fixed her posture, and Jinta crossed through the bamboo screen back to his position, fixing his clothes. Silence returned to the shrine, and the two returned to being Itsukihime and her shrine maiden guardian.

A moment passed before they heard a voice from the corridor outside. It was the village chief who had been at the meeting only a short while ago. “Princess, might I have some of your time?”

Close one, Jinta thought. If Suzune had left a little later, the two might’ve bumped into each other.

“What business do you have?” Byakuya said with calm majesty. The childhood friend that had been teasing Jinta moments ago was gone, and the Woman of Fire had taken her place.

“I was hoping for an answer to what we discussed earlier.”

“...I see.”

Even through the bamboo screen, Jinta could tell Byakuya had stiffened. He didn't know what topic the village chief was referring to, but it didn't sound pleasant.

"Pardon my intrusion." Without waiting for an answer, the village chief stepped inside. Normally, he would never skip formalities like that. Whatever he wanted to talk about must have been urgent, as was also evident from the sharp glance he sent Jinta's way. "Jinta, could you leave us for a moment?"

"But, sir, as a shrine maiden guardian, I'm to be by the princess's side at every moment, save for when I must leave for my demon-hunting duties," Jinta replied. For some reason, he felt hesitant to leave Byakuya, so he tried to use his position as an excuse, even though he knew it futile.

"Jinta, leave us be," Byakuya said. Her tone was cold. As cold as she could possibly make it. He knew her well enough to know what that meant. She didn't want him to hear what they would discuss—not as Byakuya but as Shirayuki.

"...As you wish. I shall wait outside the shrine then," he said.

"Very good."

He bowed and made to leave. Nobody in the room would say a word to stop him.

Shirayuki would have probably offered him a quick apology. But Byakuya couldn't apologize. If the Woman of Fire were to apologize to someone worldly, her sanctity would be diminished. So Byakuya had to treat Jinta as though he were of a lower status, no matter how she felt. As long as she was Itsukihime, she could not be his childhood friend.

"Jinta," she said. He stopped and turned. He had no idea what kind of expression she wore behind the bamboo screen, nor could he read any emotion from her flat voice. What came were not the words of his childhood friend but a request from Byakuya as Itsukihime. "Please continue to protect Kadono as you have," she said. This request was the closest to an apology that she was permitted.

"Of course. As shrine maiden guardian, I shall fulfill my duties." Likewise, he had to reply as a shrine maiden guardian, not as her childhood friend.

The bamboo screen stood only three ken⁵ away, yet it felt so distant now. His expression turned stiff as lead as he made himself seem as calm as possible and began to walk again. The hard floorboards creaked under his feet, and the frigid air of the shrine felt chillier than before.

THE MEMORY of that night fades as the years pass. But even now, the fact that it was raining remains clear.

Jinta finished his report to Itsukihime, returned home for the first time in two days, and welcomed a new day. His home wasn't far from the base of the hill where the shrine stood. A straw roof topped walls of mud strewn with cedar bark, as houses have been made since long ago. There was a dirt-floor area that doubled as both an entrance and a kitchen, a space with wooden floors and a sunken hearth, and two rooms lined with tatami mats. Not a large home by any means but far more than he and his sister needed to live. He had been given the home when he became shrine maiden guardian at fifteen, and it was the same home the two had lived in with Motoharu and Shirayuki.

"Suzune, wake up. It's already morning." Jinta lightly shook his snoring sister.

Instead of getting up, Suzune stubbornly curled herself into a ball. The childish gesture warmed his heart. In all the years they had lived together, his sister's difficulties with mornings hadn't changed. In fact, trying to wake her had become one of his few amusements.

He gazed at his sleeping sister and reminisced. The two were born to a fairly well-off merchant family in Edo and grew up wanting for nothing. However, their mother died giving birth to Suzune, so their father had raised them alone. Despite that, Jinta's father always found time between managing his busy store to play with Jinta and cook him his favorite food, isobe mochi—mochi grilled with soy sauce and wrapped in seaweed.

Jinta's father had been a strict, serious man when it came to work, but Jinta knew him as a kind father. Although the boy felt gratitude for this, it was not enough for him to stay. For his father's kindness did not extend to Suzune.

"That thing is not my daughter." What their father felt towards Suzune could only be described as hatred. He would harm her, abuse her. At that age, Jinta didn't blame his father for his attitude, since he believed the man was angry

because her birth had killed their mother. Instead, Jinta tried his hardest to give his sister some peace in any way he could.

Suzune grew attached to Jinta, the only one to show her any love. Their father admonished him for it, but Jinta never stopped caring for her, staying by her side so she wouldn't receive worse abuse.

Jinta loved both his sister and his father. He tried to maintain a facsimile of what he thought a family should be, even though he was only a child. But it was futile.

"That monster's gone. It'll never come back here again." His father's hate-filled visage as he spoke those words that rainy night was so different from the stern yet gentle look he used with Jinta. He'd abandoned Suzune without remorse. He hit her, kicked her, said hateful things to her, and then threw her out. He'd never once considered her his daughter.

Jinta loved his father but couldn't look past what he did any longer. So, he ran after Suzune and left with her. Even with the rain soaking them, even without a place to go, he knew he wanted to stay by her side until the end. Thus, the pair left their hometown and wound up in the village of Kadono thirteen years ago.

Back in the present, Suzune mumbled, "Just a little longer..."

Jinta couldn't help smiling at the fact that she could afford to sleep in like this. Their life in Kadono was peaceful, far more so than their life in Edo. His decision to leave Edo was sheer impulse, yet it worked out for the best.

But one worry nagged at him.

"You haven't changed. Not one bit." He ran his fingers through her reddish-brown streaked hair, comparing what she looked like now with what she looked like in his memories. She'd hardly changed since the two came to Kadono. Even after thirteen years, she still appeared to be seven years old.

He looked at his sleeping, ever-youthful sister and said, "Okay, time to wake up for real." He gave her a stronger shake this time, finally rousing her.

"Mhn... Good morning, Jinta." She sat up slowly, still drowsy, bobbing her head up and down.

He flicked at her forehead. "Go splash some water on your face to wake up. Breakfast is ready."

"Okaaay." Head still bobbing, Suzune slipped from her futon and unsteadily made her way to the kitchen area.

Jinta watched her stagger over and let out a happy sigh. Just a typical morning for the two of them.

"Do you not have to go in early today?"

"Nope. I have until midday before I need to head out to the shrine."

"Really? He he, yay!"

They ate a simple breakfast of boiled barley and rice with a side of pickled vegetables. Afterwards, Jinta prepared his things. A messenger would be coming to the shrine this morning, so he had been told to show up when the sun was at its peak instead of earlier, as he usually did. Thanks to that, he had a rare laid-back morning.

Happy she had more time to spend with him, Suzune climbed onto Jinta's lap and leaned against him. He thought this absolutely adorable and occasionally paused to pat her hair and stare.

"Hm? Is there something on my face?" She turned around and smiled. The bandage covering her right eye had come apart slightly.

"Your bandage is loose."

"Ah..." She quickly fixed the bandage.

She'd kept her eye covered since Edo. For the longest time, Jinta hadn't understood why, not until that fateful rainy night. He remembered it even now: the sight of his young sister standing in the torrential rain, abandoned by her father, with no place to go. *"It's okay. I'm happy as long as you're by my side."*

She'd smiled for him then, despite all the pain she bore. But he saw something else as well. The rain had soaked her bandage and, as it came undone, he glimpsed the true cause of their father's abuse.

Jinta was sure of what he'd seen. Suzune's right eye was red.

She fixed her bandage and looked up at Jinta with worry. "Better?"

"Yeah."

Red eyes were proof that someone was a demon. Suzune understood that their father mistreated her because of her red right eye, so she'd kept it covered, even after leaving Edo.

Not that doing so was of any use now. The two had lived in Kadono for many years, but Suzune still remained in the form of a child. That, alongside the fact that she hid an eye, was enough for others to piece together what she was.

And yet none of the other villagers ever brought it up. Not even the village chief, with all his strictness, or the arrogant Kiyomasa so much as mentioned it.

"The two of us are truly blessed," Jinta said. Kadono had become a place they could really call home. The village has come to accept him, an outsider, and her, a girl with demon blood. He felt nothing but gratitude towards Motoharu for bringing them here, as well as Yokaze for welcoming them.

"I feel blessed enough just being with you, Jinta." Suzune's hair swung from one side to the other. Her perhaps *too* straightforward display of affection was genuine, but her youthful eye seemed to probe deep into Jinta's heart as she spoke. "...But maybe you'd be happier being with the princess instead?"

"Ngh..." Jinta found himself hard-pressed to reply.

As he hesitated, Suzune continued. "Do you want to marry Princess?"

"No." This time he replied without hesitation. His answer wasn't because of their difference in status, it was how he honestly felt.

"Is it because Princess is Princess?" she asked.

"It's not that," he sighed. "...I guess there's no point hiding it anymore, huh? I like Shirayuki. But I don't particularly want to marry her."

"Even though you like her?"

"Precisely because I like her."

Suzune puffed up her cheeks in frustrated confusion. Jinta stroked her head, amused at how she looked even younger than usual this way.

He continued, saying, “I like Shirayuki. But I respect Byakuya even more. That’s all.”

“I don’t get it. Aren’t people supposed to want to be together forever with the ones they love?”

“I guess. But I can’t really do that.”

“But you still like her?”

“Yeah. ...Even I think it’s strange.”

The conversation ended without a real conclusion. A silence fell between them. Suzune trembled a bit, then snuggled closer to Jinta—not out of a desire for affection but out of fear. “Jinta...”

The two were close enough to feel one another’s warmth, and yet she seemed so forlorn. He had to wonder just what it was she feared?

Iron could be made by burning iron sand with charcoal. The charcoal used in this process was colloquially known as tatara charcoal and was typically made from oak and sawtooth oak that was burned until it partially carbonized. Because tatara charcoal played a critical role in ironmaking, the village had to make more of it now and again. During such times, a dense plume of smoke could be seen from as far away as the village dwellings. When combined with the blacksmiths’ hammers, rhythmically pounding away at the iron, it veiled the village in a strange ambiance.

Even though he wasn’t involved in ironmaking, Jinta’s curiosity was piqued by the activities of the village. He watched the plume of smoke rise from the corner of his eye as he walked to the shrine, his trusty sword at his hip. The sun was nearly at its zenith, meaning it was about time for his work to begin. The cling-clang of iron being struck echoed in the distance, soothing to his ears.

However, his good mood was dashed when he saw who stood along his path.

“Well, well. If it ain’t Jinta.” Kiyomasa plastered on his usual disagreeable grin. He dangled a bundled item from his right hand and sneered. “You just *now* heading over to Byakuya’s? Oh, right, right. It was just you who wasn’t called in

this morning. How could I forget?”

“Kiyomasa, at least try to be mindful of what you say outside the shrine. It reflects badly on the princess,” Jinta said. One never knew when and where someone might overhear their words. Jinta himself could overlook insults directed at him, but he couldn’t overlook Kiyomasa’s direct usage of their shrine maiden’s name.

“It’s fine, she told me to call her that herself.” Kiyomasa smirked, unfazed by Jinta’s glare. He seemed in an oddly good mood—not that his unpleasant manner changed whether he was in a good mood or a bad one.

“...What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Whoa, whoa, calm down. You’re never going to land a woman with a scary face like that.”

Kiyomasa had looked down on Jinta from the moment they first met. He didn’t know why that was, but there were times he’d sense hostility from the man. To put it bluntly, Jinta couldn’t see himself ever getting along with him.

“If you have no business with me, I’m going.” As a shrine maiden guardian, Jinta acted as calmly as he could, but he was actually quite short-tempered. Despite his calm exterior, he was just about fed up underneath.

“Oh, I almost forgot. Here.” Kiyomasa tossed the bundled item over.

Confused, Jinta stared at him distrustfully. “What’s this?”

“Just some manju. A peddler came by, so I bought some.”

Jinta’s thoughts screeched to a halt. Why in the world was *this* man giving him manju? He was perplexed by the illogic of it.

Kiyomasa grimaced. “It’s not for you, dumbass. It’s for Suzune-chan. You know, ’cause she doesn’t get out much.”

Jinta was still confused. The two of them weren’t friends, so why would Kiyomasa bother with a gift for his sister? Jinta stared at him, trying to figure out his ulterior motive.

Kiyomasa awkwardly averted his gaze and said, “I mean, I’m sure Suzune-chan would like something sweet from time to time.”

Despite his awkwardness, it was clear he was sincere. Jinta was still a bit shocked, but he wasn't too rude to show gratitude. He bowed and, with great reluctance, said, "Sorry. I appreciate it."

"Ugh, gross. As if being thanked by you means anything. Just make sure you give that to her, all right?"

"I will. But why her?" Kiyomasa and Suzune hardly interacted. Jinta couldn't fathom why he would go through all this effort for her.

"...We're alike, she and I. So, I get her pain...although I can't be as strong as she is." With that vague reply, Kiyomasa then walked past Jinta, leaving the latter alone with the manju, confused. Something about his figure as he left seemed somewhat disheartened to Jinta.

"Ah, you're here."

The moment Jinta entered the shrine, the village chief let out a sigh of relief. The other influential figures present looked at one another, similarly relieved.

Jinta thought their reactions odd, but made his way to the bamboo screen and kneeled before bowing to Byakuya. "Your guardian, Jinta. Present."

"...We've been waiting for you," the voice beyond the screen said. He could not make out her expression, but her voice was stiff with worry. Something must have happened. Hesitantly, Byakuya continued. "Originally, you were meant to carry out your duties guarding me here, but..."

"But circumstances have changed," the village chief said, cutting in. "One of the village girls was out picking herbs when she spotted two people lurking in Irazu Forest. Of the two, one of them seems to have a body far larger than humanly possible."

Jinta's expression tensed as he understood what the village chief was getting at. For a shrine maiden guardian, few things took precedence over guarding Itsukihime, but eliminating spirits that threatened their mountain village was one such duty.

"We'll ask Kiyomasa to guard the shrine," Byakuya said. "As for you, Jinta, it's

demon hunting. Go investigate if there's anything unusual in the Irazu Forest. If you deem what you find a threat to the village, slay it."

Jinta straightened up. He let her order resonate within him and stared forward with a piercing gaze. There was only one response he could give, so he said it quietly but firmly, "As you wish. I shall assume my duty as demon hunter."

Irazu Forest was the colloquial name for the woods that surrounded Kadono, particularly the stretch that extended north beyond the shrine. Its dense vegetation was a plentiful source of mountain vegetables and medicinal flowers. It was so bountiful that a woman from the village could go in and fill her basket in no time at all.

In contrast to its name, which could be read as the "Forbidden Forest," the Irazu Forest was a vital part of Kadono life. Why it was named so was a mystery. According to legend, Mahiru-sama once lived in the forest as a fox, but the truth of that was debatable. In any case, the reality was that Irazu Forest was simply known to the people of Kadono as a place to pick wild plants, nothing more.

"Th-this way, Jinta-sama!"

Chitose, the girl who'd spotted the two strange people in the forest, led the way. Jinta frowned at the overwhelming smell of greenery. It was near the peak of summer. He said, "We've come quite a long way."

Chitose was a number of years younger than Shirayuki, but she was still a girl of Kadono, the iron-producing village. She had stamina, and her breath had remained steady through their long trek into the forest. She hiked the animal trail with an unfaltering pace.

"This area here's good for picking chickweeds...sir," she said. Chickweeds were a small flower that could be boiled down into a digestive medicine. Wild herbs were indispensable for a mountain village like Kadono, where medicine-peddlers seldom visited. Collecting the plants was generally a woman's job. "I saw those two figures this morning when I came to pick chickweed. One of them was a full size bigger than even you, Jinta-nii—er, Jinta-sama, and, um..."

Between her nervousness and her youth, there wasn't much information to glean from her explanation. Of more concern to Jinta, however, was her tone. "Chitose..." he began. "You don't need to be so formal. You can just talk to me as usual."

"But I could never be so rude to a shrine maiden guardian."

Jinta sighed. A shrine maiden guardian was, as the name implied, someone who protected Itsukihime; in that way, he was also someone who protected the village. Because of that, almost all the villagers, and not just the village chief and other influential figures, treated him with respect. Still, he felt strange being given the "sama" honorific by Chitose. With a smile, he said, "I wouldn't mind you calling me Jinta-nii like you used to, you know?"

"Th-that's..." Chitose blushed in embarrassment. In the past, she had referred to him as "Jinta-nii," using the somewhat childish honorific children used for boys who were close to one's age. She had been shy Suzune's first-ever friend and a close acquaintance of his by extension. Sometimes Suzune had even preferred playing with Chitose over spending time with him. Even now he remembered how they looked running around together. He'd felt a bit sad that his sister had taken to someone other than him, but he also felt happy for her.

"It's been a while since we've talked like this," he said.

"...It has."

"Have you been well?"

"I have. My health's one of the few things I can boast about...sir."

However, at some point he stopped seeing the two play together. What had happened? He thought about it and then recalled, frowning, "*You're still so small, Suzune-chan.*"

Of course. Chitose had grown up while Suzune stayed a child. Reminded of the demon blood in her veins, and not wanting to lose her first friend, Suzune had distanced herself from Chitose on purpose.

Jokingly, so as not to seem angry, Jinta said, "Oh dear, I guess you hate me too much to treat me like you used to."

“That’s not...! That’s not true, but...” Chitose trailed off. It seemed it was too difficult for her to treat him like she used to, after all. They’d stopped talking as Chitose and Suzune grew estranged. After all these years, he was no longer “Jinta-nii” to Chitose but Jinta the shrine maiden guardian.

Now he saw why Byakuya was always so up in arms about his stiff attitude. “I see. Being treated differently than you’re used to is pretty uncomfortable...”

“I’m sorry?” Chitose said.

“Oh, nothing. Just talking to myself. You’ve led me far enough. Go ahead and turn back.” He put his left hand on his trusty sword, thumb against the sword guard. Exhaling quietly, he turned his focus to his surroundings.

The forest was silent. Neither insect nor leaf stirred.

Complete and utter silence.

“Will you...be all right?” she said.

“Yes. Hurry along before it gets dark.”

“Okay. I’ll take my leave then.” Perhaps sensing that the air around him had changed, or perhaps simply because she’d been told to, Chitose turned to leave without another word.

However, she stopped after only a few steps. “What’s wrong?” Jinta asked.

The girl turned around and, with much hesitation, asked, “Um... Has Suzune-chan been well?”

It was a question being asked by the Chitose from their nostalgic past. Understanding this, he replied as “Jinta-nii” and not as the shrine maiden guardian. “...Yeah. She’s still as much of a late riser as ever, though.”

Chitose’s eyes went wide, surprised by the reply. With a smile much more youthful than her years, she said, “Thank you very much. U-um, I’ll take my leave for real this time!”

“Take care on your way back.”

“Yes, you as well, Jinta-nii—er, Jinta-sama!” She waved hard as she left.

He smiled. For a brief moment, he’d been able to return to the past. But his

new solitude brought a tinge of sadness alongside the happiness he felt. The three of them—Jinta, Shirayuki, and Suzune—had always been together in their youth, but in hindsight, Jinta realized, Suzune had only become glued to their sides *after* she grew apart from Chitose.

How had his younger sister felt when she distanced herself from her first friend? Sad? Lonely? No. Such things were easy to put into words, but what she carried deep inside was probably something beyond what any words could express.

“Pathetic...” he muttered. Many years had passed since that distant rainy night, and he had grown a little stronger, but he loathed how powerless he still was to help his own sister. Long ago, Motoharu once said, “Nothing that exists is changeless,” but Jinta felt like he hadn’t changed one bit. He still couldn’t protect what was dear to him.

He sunk deeper into contemplation but quickly realized that now was not the time for sentimentality. He shook his head, chasing away the needless thoughts, and then looked up. The young, early summer leaves of thickly grown trees hid the sky from view. Blinding sunbeams filtered through them, and the dense fragrance of trees filled his lungs.

There was still no sound. No cries of insects. No rustling of leaves.

A silent forest.

He hadn’t moved, but he felt as though he had walked into an entirely different world. Sensing something off, he pressed his thumb against his sword guard, loosening the sword from its scabbard.

Suddenly, the wind roared.

For a brief moment, Jinta thought that sound had returned to the forest, but in truth, it was a figure seven-shaku tall—a full shaku taller than Jinta—swinging a fist at him.

Jinta wasn’t shaken by the sudden appearance of the assailant. His face remained impassive as he leapt backwards.

A loud thud sounded as the ground shook like an earthquake. The place where Jinta stood moments ago was now a crater. As the dust began to clear,

his assailant came into view. On one knee, they stared unblinkingly at the ground and said, **“I was hoping a surprise attack would be the end of it.”**

The dust plume cleared completely, and they slowly lifted their fist and stood. They had dark-red skin, loose, disheveled hair, two horns, inhumanly enormous muscles and physique, and an overall grotesque appearance.

Most telling, of course, were their red eyes. The muscular being standing calmly before Jinta was, without a doubt, a demon.

“Couldn’t wait until nighttime to give me trouble?” Jinta allowed himself a wry grin in disbelief over how ostentatiously demonic this demon looked. Then he refocused himself with a sharp glare.

“Certainly, we spirits are thought to only act at night, but that’s not necessarily true. While I can’t speak for the riff-raff, superior demons like me act when they please.”

“So, you consider yourself superior for a demon? I had no idea you beasts had enough pride to care about hierarchy.” Jinta scoffed but didn’t take his eyes off the demon, wary of its next move.

The demon was clearly an experienced fighter. Although he looked like he’d let his guard down, he maintained a vigilant distance from Jinta. **“Should a man who takes a woman along on a demon hunt be speaking of pride?”**

Jinta clicked his tongue. The demon must have been watching him for quite some time. He said, “If you were watching, you should’ve attacked before we parted ways.” If the demon had attacked while Chitose was still there, Jinta wouldn’t have been able to dodge that first attack as simply. So why hadn’t the demon attacked them both?

The demon scowled and said, **“I am not so crude.”** He seemed to take offense to the idea, responding with visible raw anger. He might be willing to make a surprise attack, but he seemed to consider attacking a woman to be beneath him.

It was strange. Demons had life spans of nearly a thousand years and were stronger than humans by birthright, yet the words of a weak human so easily rankled this particular demon’s pride.

“Enough of that. Beyond this point is our land, demon. Turn back now,” Jinta said, without letting his guard down. He braced himself slightly. The demon responded in kind by tightening his fists.

“Did you think I’d obey?”

“Not really.” The demon was looking past Jinta; he must’ve been aiming for Kadono after all. In that case, there was only one thing for the shrine maiden guardian to do. “It doesn’t really matter. You won’t be getting past me all the same.” Jinta took a step forward and drew his sword, then pulled his right foot back and moved his blade to the side, pointing behind him. Not that he’d expected his words to do anything against a demon. The demon wanted to invade Kadono, and Jinta couldn’t allow that. A clash was inevitable.

“I much prefer it this way too.”

The two were in a thick forest, but by luck, they stood in a clearing open enough to not restrict their movement. Jinta glared fiercely, and the demon assumed a fighting stance as well. The small talk ended there.

Without warning, Jinta kicked off with his left foot and closed the distance, moving into a smooth overhead slash. With his blade nearly touching his back, he leaped, not letting his momentum come to a halt, and swung with full force down on the demon’s head.

By traditional martial arts wisdom, this was a foolhardy move. A leap followed by a big swing left a large opening; one might as well ask to be killed. But demon skin was hard, and weaker techniques wouldn’t leave a scratch. To slay a demon, one had to make each stroke as powerful as possible.

The demon sighed quietly. He crossed his arms above his head, fully intent on taking the blow.

Don’t you dare underestimate me, Jinta thought. The blade he swung was of Kadono make. He was certain it could tear through the demon’s skin.

Perhaps sensing Jinta’s confidence, the demon abandoned his stance and retreated—but he was too late. Jinta’s blade caught merely a sun’s length—the length of a fingernail—into the demon’s chest. Red blood spilled forth. How laughable it was that even demons bled red.

“...Not bad,” the demon said. It seemed he felt little pain from the wound, and in fact he even seemed happy to meet someone who could cut him.

Jinta found the demon’s complacency irritating. He stepped in for another strike but was kept in check by a succession of swings from the demon. The demon’s movements were artless, merely thrusting his fists forward, but Jinta knew not to underestimate the blows. Demons had strength that far surpassed any human’s. His strikes could be lethal even without technique.

Jinta pushed off with his right leg and twisted his upper body sideways, evading a right-handed punch from the demon. Now to the side of the demon’s extended arm, he prepared another horizontal swing. This time his sword traced the opposite path, going upwards. To make up for the lack of momentum, he prepared to twist his torso for leverage. He readied his blade, parallel with the demon’s arm, and aimed for the base. Just then, he saw someone else out of the corner of his eye.

“Not so fast.”

A woman in a kimono robe appeared and thrust a three-pronged spear at Jinta’s eyes, forcing him to dodge. Jinta forcibly pulled his body left, causing his blade to miss the first demon’s arm. He quickly regained his balance and backed off.

“Close one, huh?” The woman’s skin was ghostly pale and her eyes red.

“I’m guessing you’re the other one,” Jinta said, clicking his tongue. He had been told two figures had been spotted in the forest, so he should have assumed the other was lurking nearby when only one appeared. He had failed to pay attention to his surroundings and allowed a perfect opportunity to slip through his fingers because of it. He had nobody but himself to blame.

“Thanks for the save, I guess,” the first demon said. **“But that boy’s movements just now... Is he really human?”**

The two demons seemed acquainted. Maybe they were friends?

“Dunno. Perhaps he’s on his way to becoming a spirit after spending so much time with one of ours. Y’know, what’s-her-name... Suzune-chan?”

Jinta’s blood boiled at the female demon’s grating voice. Without even

thinking to ask how they knew Suzune's name, he cut into their conversation and spat, "Is that right? Then die."

His feet had already dug into the earth before the words were out his mouth. With palpably murderous rage, he swung at the female demon's neck. But his strike was far too wide and obvious.

"Hmph."

His sword was blocked with ease, swatted off its trajectory like a fly.

Jinta ground his teeth, fuming that he hadn't killed the female demon. Realizing how agitated he was getting, he backed away and took a deep breath to quell his anger, but calm just wouldn't return to him. So he stared with hatred at the female demon instead and said, "Take it back. Suzune isn't one of yours. She's my sister."

"Ooo, so scary. You look more demon than me! Oh, but I do admire your love for your sister," the female demon joked, letting Jinta's bloodlust slide right off her.

The muscular demon seemed indifferent to Jinta's bloodlust as well, paying him no mind and instead saying to his fellow demon, **"So? How'd it go?"**

"Perfectly, of course. Saw her with my own eyes. Her face looks exactly like what I saw. I'm pretty relieved, actually. I might've seen her with my own power, but it's still so hard to believe."

"There's no way your *Farsight* could be wrong. I have total faith in your ability. What I don't have faith in, however, is you staying on task and not goofing off."

"What the heck? That's totes creepy. What are you, my father?"

The two bantered unguardedly before Jinta. No, upon closer inspection, the only unguarded one was the female demon. The muscular demon watched Jinta, discouraging him from making a move with his eyes and slight adjustments to his posture.

"'Totes creepy'? What does that mean?" the muscular demon asked.

"It means 'very unpleasant,' apparently. With my *Farsight* I saw female

demons saying that. They were called ‘Yamanba.’ Tanned skin, white paint around their eyes, expensive-looking clothing.”⁶

“Huh. So those demons have developed their own lingo? Interesting.”

“Right? They’re even able to move about during the day. They must be superior demons with great intelligence.”

Absorbed in their own conversation, the two demons continued to ignore Jinta’s presence. Thankfully, this gave him the time he needed to collect himself.

Calm down. You can’t defeat these two while you’re so worked up, he told himself, steadying his breathing. He took a step forward and pointed at them with his sword. “Enough small talk. Tell me, what are you two after? What do you want with Kadono?”

He didn’t expect to get a meaningful answer. He was trying to buy time to regain his focus. To his surprise, the muscular demon replied, **“A future. We’re after a future for us demons.”**

His expression was serious; he didn’t seem to be lying. That only confused Jinta even more. He was about to ask for clarification when the female demon yawned.

“C’mon, let’s get out of here already. We’ve got what we came for.” She stretched her arms, then rested her three-pronged spear on her shoulder. Without waiting for a response, she turned on her heel and began walking away.

The muscular demon, unruffled by this, said, **“Fair enough. Human, come find us if you want to learn more. We’re staying in the cave further within the forest for the time being.”**

“You think I’m stupid enough to walk into your trap?”

“You’re free to believe what you want, but know this: unlike humans, demons do not lie.” With a triumphant grin, the demon left.

Jinta made no move to stop them. Not that he could if he’d wanted. It was too reckless to fight both at once; he was fine with them leaving. The two had

been trying to enter Kadono for some reason, perhaps for Byakuya or Yarai, like the village chief had suggested, which meant they were likely to come back. When they did, Jinta would have to put his life on the line to fight them again.

He wasn't afraid. This was the path he'd chosen. He had no intention of breaking his oath. But that didn't mean the path ahead wasn't precarious.

"I'm still too weak," he said with a sigh.

WHEN JINTA WAS STILL a young boy, Motoharu lost his life while fighting a demon. The man was more than just a combat mentor to Jinta. After leaving his old home behind, he'd considered him a second father.

He must have really looked up to Motoharu as a boy. It had to be so. Why else would the man's last moments, when he challenged the demon with all his might, be so vividly seared into Jinta's mind?

Jinta. Become a man who can cherish his hatred. Those were his second father's last words. Since then, Jinta had become a shrine maiden guardian and trained diligently, and he believed that he had grown a little stronger. But he still didn't know the meaning behind those words.

"Two demons, you say?"

"Yes. By the sound of things, the female one snuck into the village and then left. Whether it was for reconnaissance or something else entirely is beyond me."

It was evening by the time Jinta returned to the shrine. Even though the sun was already setting, the influential figures of the village still gathered to hear his report. They didn't take the news well. The demons were probably preparing to attack Kadono, and soon. Fraught with worry, the men whispered amongst themselves. Only the village chief remained calm.

"So, they're after the princess, then. Or Yarai. Hrmph." The village chief grunted as he nodded and stroked his chin. After a few moments of thought, he looked towards the bamboo screen. "Given that they might be after you...have you given any thought to what we discussed this morning?"

"...I have," Byakuya said sadly.

Jinta hadn't been summoned for their morning meeting, so he hadn't a clue what they'd discussed, but from Byakuya's reaction, he could guess it was something she wasn't enthused about. He asked, "Chief, what was discussed at

this morning's meeting?"

"We discussed measures for if the demon attacks grow more frequent. That is all."

"Is that so?"

The village chief sidestepped Jinta's question. The inexperienced youth was unlikely to get any real answers from the seasoned man if the latter didn't want to give him any.

The village chief continued, "More importantly, we need to discuss our plan against these two demons."

He was clearly trying to change the topic, but Jinta only nodded quietly. He couldn't deny that this was a more pressing matter. The muscular demon's strength was problematic; he'd proved difficult to fight even one-on-one. Add in the female demon and victory seemed nigh impossible for Jinta. But that didn't change what had to be done.

"Why don't I go hunt them directly?" he said emphatically. His chances of victory might be low, but a shrine maiden guardian couldn't shirk their duty.

His suggestion was immediately shot down. "No, that'd be unwise. You're Kadono's strongest swordsman. Now that we know demons are nearby, we can't have you leaving the village. We should send some men to check on the cave you mentioned first," the village chief replied.

"Yes, yes, exactly. We wouldn't be able to hold out at all if they attacked while you were out. I'd hate for things to end up like last time..." said another man.

The men seemed vehemently opposed to Jinta leaving the village. The death of Yokaze, the previous Itsukihime, was still fresh in their minds. It had happened many years ago, while Jinta was still young. Without warning, a demon appeared in Kadono, one with a stature far greater than any man. It was a hideous fiend, skinless, its muscles and organs laid bare. How such a monster snuck in undetected remained a mystery. It attacked the main part of the shrine, killed Yokaze, and devoured her corpse. It was too strong. Its strength was greater even than the village's strongest swordsman, Motoharu.

I couldn't even protect the woman I love... Damn it. I'm so pathetic.

As a guardian, Motoharu had failed to protect Itsukihime. And as a husband, he had failed to protect his wife. But he still had a village to safeguard, so he challenged the demon with absolutely everything he had left. He faced the demon, fully prepared to give his life in exchange.

In the end, he traded his life for the demon's death and protected the village's peace.

"Forgive me. I wasn't thinking," Jinta said. Back then, the worst-case scenario had been avoided only because Motoharu happened to be in the village. Having Jinta leave the village this time was out of the question.

The men looked at one another, flustered by Jinta's apology.

"That's, well..." the village chief hemmed and hawed.

"Nah, don't worry about it. We know you understand the risks better than anyone," one of the men said sympathetically. They knew that Jinta had witnessed the end of Motoharu's last battle.

The rest is in your hands, Jinta. Take care of Shirayuki, and keep close to Suzune.

He still remembered how his second father had looked, fighting the demon with Jinta at his back. Perhaps Motoharu had fought so recklessly in part to protect him.

"Forgive us. We didn't intend to dredge up any bad memories," the man said.

The gathered men bowed their heads and Jinta squirmed a bit. Yet he was somewhat pleased that they were properly treating him as Motoharu's son. "That's all right. But we should focus on the situation at hand."

"Oh, right, right. We need to hammer out a plan."

The group turned their sights from the past to the present, but no one could come up with a clear course of action. The parties present only shared noncommittal thoughts. The meeting dragged along for some time with no concrete plan.

"What do you think of the matter, Princess?" the chief asked, sending all eyes towards the bamboo screen. The shrine quickly went silent as everyone waited

to hear their shrine maiden's guidance.

The air was tense, but Byakuya showed no sign that it affected her. Itsukihime had to be unwavering for her people, lest they grow worried. She spoke with majesty, to the point of sounding pompous. "Jinta shall rest a day, while the men of the village shall gather and search Irazu Forest. The demons we face are powerful enough to survive an encounter with a shrine maiden guardian, hence the shrine guards shall accompany them, but none must put themselves at risk."

"Indeed, that sounds wisest," the village chief said, bowing his head deeply. The rest of the men followed suit, agreeing and bowing as well.

Jinta struggled to suppress a smile from slipping onto his face. Seeing Byakuya bring the village together as Itsukihime made him feel as proud as if he were the one being praised.

She said, "The sun has already set. Retire for the night, everyone. Oh, and Jinta, there's something I'd like to discuss with you. Lend me some of your time."

"As you wish."

Byakuya wasted no time calling the meeting to an end. When they were alone, Jinta checked his surroundings as usual before getting up. He crossed past the bamboo screen and was welcomed by Byakuya, whose mild-mannered attitude ran in stark contrast to her earlier dignified air.

"Yep. Nice work today."

She had already shed the mantle of Byakuya and was just plain Shirayuki. Jinta was surprised, as always, by the speed at which her demeanor changed. He gave an astonished sigh and said, "You're... How do I put it? You're really something else."

"Huh? Whad'ya mean?" she replied with a look. She seemed unaware of the astonishing effect herself.

"Exactly that."

Jinta understood that both Byakuya, who prayed for Kadono's prosperity as

Itsukihime, and Shirayuki, who he knew from their youth, were equally real parts of her identity. But even so, the way she could switch between her selves at the drop of a hat never failed to surprise him.

“Huh. I don’t really get it, but sit down for now. I’m sure you’re tired,” she said.

He did as he was told but felt hesitant to sit cross-legged before their Goddess, instead sitting in the stiff *seiza*-style. Perhaps amused by his inflexibility, Byakuya giggled and said, “You’re free to relax, you know?”

“I can’t help it, it’s my nature.”

She shrugged as though to say, *What am I to do with you?* before hesitantly venturing, “Hey... You think you’ll be all right?”

Her eyes were moist with worry, and Jinta immediately understood that she was referring to the demons. “They’re tough, but I can take them,” he replied.

In truth, he knew it wouldn’t be so simple. He wasn’t foolish enough to think it would be easy taking on two demons at once, and there was no telling how the dice would roll on their next encounter. But he still chose to leave no doubt in his words. He didn’t want to show her any weakness, perhaps out of a desire to impress her.

Byakuya let out a relieved sigh. “Oh really? You seem pretty confident.”

His choice had some merit after all, if it put her at ease. “I’d like to think I’ve earned the right to be, with my training.”

“...Yeah, I suppose you have. I know because I watched you train firsthand.”

Nostalgic memories of their youth surfaced in Jinta’s mind. Her father, Motoharu, would train him daily, and she would cheer him on. Those happy days still lived on inside him.

Jinta’s chest warmed as he recalled that distant past. It seemed Byakuya was doing the same, as they shared an awkward but dear smile.

At that point, Jinta noticed a number of books sprawled out on the tatami mat.

“Oh, those?” Byakuya said. “I got them from Kiyomasa.”

Kiyo...masa? he thought, freezing over. The warmth he felt in his chest vanished. Why was something of that man's in here?

"He brings me books to kill time with sometimes. You know, because I can't go outside."

"R-right..." he said, trying to sound as calm as possible. The answer should've been obvious. Yet he only felt an indescribable sense of shock that Kiyomasa had tried to get to know her.

"Kiyomasa's even trying to write a book of his own, apparently. He got all red in the face when I told him to let me read it, though."

She smiled as she talked about her conversation with Kiyomasa, even though until now she'd only shown this happy side of hers to Jinta.

"Right, because that's all you're good for anyway." Kiyomasa's ridicule flashed hot in the back of Jinta's mind. What if those weren't just empty words? What if the one who had truly "protected" Shirayuki up until now wasn't—

"Jinta?"

Her voice brought him back to reality and out of his strange delusions. Her inquisitive look dispelled the gloom clouding his face. He said, "O-oh, sorry, what were you saying?"

"Just wondering what's up. You seemed to be thinking about something."

"Ah, it's nothing. Don't worry about it."

It really was nothing. Certainly nothing worth bothering her over. He had vowed to protect her, so he should be happy when she found some peace, no matter who it came from.

He pleaded with his heart to calm down and made himself look as unperturbed as possible.

"...Hey, you want to try slipping out somewhere tomorrow?" Out of the blue, Byakuya changed the topic. She had an unashamed, mischievous look about her.

"Huh? Where's this coming from?" Jinta replied.

She ignored him, saying, "It's been so long since I've seen the Irazu Forest or gone fishing in the Modori River. Oh, it's been forever since I've eaten something sweet as well. Chitose's family runs a teahouse, right? We could relax and eat some dango there. That'd be nice." She knew better than anyone that she wasn't allowed to leave the shrine. Still, she counted off all the places she wanted to go on her fingers. "Oh, and I'd love to walk through Kadono too. I've been living in here for how many years now? I feel it's only right that I see my own village every now and then."

"Really, where's this all coming from all of a sudden?" Jinta stopped her with some firmness. The smile on her face looked genuine at first glance, but he could tell it was fake. "...Is something wrong?"

For a brief moment, she tensed at the question, her small shoulders trembling, but she soon returned to normal, tilting her head childishly and saying, "No. Why?"

The gesture was cute, but Jinta didn't relent. "Shirayuki."

"It's nothing, don't worry about it," she said jokingly.

He had said the same exact thing earlier, and she hadn't followed up out of consideration for him. It was clear she wanted him to do the same, but even though he knew it wasn't fair, he couldn't.

He began, "You've always been brimming with curiosity since you were a kid, and you're more impulsive than any boy I know."

"...Huh? Hey, what's with the bad-mouthing now"

"But you always think of others and force yourself to smile when times are tough. When there's something difficult you're trying to avoid talking about, you pretend to get in high spirits over something."

"Ugh..." Byakuya flinched. Jinta had hit the nail on the head. She was avoiding a difficult talk, an important one they'd eventually have to have. He could tell, because they'd spent years together. He knew he couldn't let her blow it off. It would only hurt her more.

"You're so unfair, Jinta."

He had hidden his jealousy from her, but he wouldn't let her hide whatever this was. It definitely wasn't fair. "Nothing I can say against that." He shrugged, but his gaze stayed glued to hers.

It was clear he was doing this for her sake. She hesitated but eventually let out a sigh of defeat. "Jeez... I can't hide anything from you."

"Sorry."

"No, I should be thanking you. This is something that needs to be said. I was wrong for trying to avoid it." She seemed a bit relieved, as though she had gotten over something, or perhaps given into it. Her smile was painfully transparent and emotionless. "...Um, Jinta. There's something I need to tell you. Something important. So...will you spend the day with me tomorrow?"

A small but desperate request. The thought of declining it didn't even come to mind. Slowly, he nodded.

Her face brightened like a lantern in the dark of night, but that joy faded almost instantly. She looked away, her image in profile bearing a tinge of loneliness, before casting her gaze downwards.

SHIRAYUKI'S MOTHER, Yokaze, died when Shirayuki was only nine. Her father, Motoharu, then gave his life to kill the demon that devoured Yokaze, leaving Shirayuki all alone.

The night after Motoharu and Yokaze's modest funeral, Shirayuki and Jinta visited the hill overlooking the Modori River, only a short distance from the village. The flowing waters shimmered with the reflection of the stars. The light of fireflies, or perhaps will-o'-the-wisps, drifted to and fro near the shore. Up above, moonlight filled the sky. The two stared at the scenery together, Jinta's heart beating just a bit faster.

"I'm going to become the next Itsukihime," Shirayuki said suddenly and evenly, as though only making a passing comment.

The role of Itsukihime had been handled by her lineage for generations, so it was only natural she would become the next Lady of Fire. But Jinta didn't understand. *How could you say that?* he thought, a bit aghast. Her mother, the late Itsukihime, had been devoured by a demon, and her father had traded his life to avenge her. He couldn't understand why Shirayuki would want to follow in her mother's footsteps after her parents met such a cruel end. He wanted to say something, to question her. But, sensing her silent determination, he couldn't bring himself to say anything.

She continued, "I love the Kadono that my mother protected. I want to be its strength if I can." Her face in profile lacked its usual childishness. What she was looking at remained a mystery even now, but it must have been something beautiful, far more beautiful than the likes of the flowing river. It just had to be.

"But that means we won't be able to meet anymore," she added. She knew she could no longer see Jinta and Suzune so easily if she became Itsukihime, but that was all right. She loved this land she called her home, as well as her mother who had protected it. She didn't mind making small sacrifices for Kadono's sake.

“No, I’ll still come see you.” The words were out of Jinta’s mouth before he realized it. For the first time ever, he sensed *beauty* in the girl he’d known since his childhood. He wanted her to live for her own happiness, especially after what had happened to the previous Itsukihime. Shirayuki was choosing to walk the same path as her mother, even knowing the end she’d met, making a selfless vow so incongruent with her tender age. It was beautiful—she was beautiful—and Jinta wanted to protect that beauty.

“I’m weak now, but I’ll become strong,” he said. They were the words of a child, but he meant them sincerely. He truly believed he could protect her from anything, so long as he had the strength. “I’ll become strong. Strong enough to beat whatever demon comes. I’ll become your shrine maiden guardian and come see you again.” His words formed a prayer in his heart: *Let me become strong. Let me become a man who can match her strength.* “And from then on, I’ll be the one to protect you.”

Tears streamed down her cheeks. Her moist eyes shone with a different light. Without bothering to wipe her tears, she smiled softly and said, “Hey, Jinta? Did you know Mother met and married Father *after* she became Itsukihime?”

Her smile set Jinta at ease. Things would be okay. The two of them would overcome this hurdle, no matter how high it might be.

“I’ll choose you as my shrine maiden guardian when I become Itsukihime, so —” A wind blew by, stirring the trees. “—I want you to choose me as your bride someday!”

Her words melted into the distant night sky, and the pale moon rippled on the water. The early summer breeze that ran through the forest slipped through their fingers, and its warmth escaped them both, to their dismay. Instead, both at once, they reached for each other’s hands. Without saying a word, they gazed up at the sky.

Just as her words had melted into nothingness, that night their hearts melted into one.

“Jinta, it’s morning already. Wake up.”

Jinta's dim consciousness slowly roused. It was a warm morning, one that threatened to lull him back to sleep. "Suzune...?" he groaned.

He wanted to sleep forever if he could, but of course he could not. Fighting his lethargy, he opened his heavy eyes and sat up. He was about to thank his younger sister for waking him when he noticed that something was off.

"Good morning." The one waking him had long, captivating black hair, skin as white as snow, gently drooping eyes, and a sweet, intoxicating voice that enthralled his sluggish mind. "Jeez, Jinta. You can't do anything without your big sister. Are you always this slow to start in the morning?"

The person before him was someone who couldn't possibly be here. In disbelief, he murmured, "Shira...yuki?"

Impossible. Why? How? His sleepy mind was now shocked wide awake, but he still couldn't make sense of what was happening. Byakuya, who couldn't leave the shrine, was waking him up. On top of that, she wasn't wearing her usual shrine maiden attire but a peach-colored kimono robe. Her long black hair was tied up as well. *Why does she look like that?*

"That's rude! You should say I look cute, if anything." She grinned, correctly guessing his thoughts. She seemed to be enjoying herself. Perhaps giddy from wearing something different, she did a twirl.

Jinta had to admit that she did look cute. But now wasn't the time. He drew closer to her and said, "Wh-what, you... What are you doing here?!" His mind was a mess. It took all he had to string together those words.

In contrast, she was utterly composed. "Huh? Don't you remember what we talked about last night? I'm here like we agreed."

What? Jinta reeled in shock. Itsukihime couldn't be seen by the masses, not simply as a rule but to maintain her sanctity as a shrine maiden. So why was she out and about?

"It's fine, the only ones who know what I look like now are the shrine attendants, the village chief, you and Kiyomasa, and Suzu-chan. I'm sure nobody will notice me out like this," she gently rebutted, guessing Jinta's thoughts once again.

He didn't feel it was fine at all. His extreme worry contrasted with her carefree smile. "But aren't the demons targeting you?"

"I know no safer place than right by your side."

"I have to leave to go look for them, though."

"*You* don't have to do anything until we know for certain where they are, remember? That's what we agreed on yesterday. You're on standby for at least one whole day, I figure."

"But what if the chief finds out?"

"Don't worry. I already got his approval."

Jinta found himself out of complaints. She had planned this perfectly.

"Anything else?" she asked with a smug grin, utterly confident in her victory.

"...No. You got me beat," he muttered with a bitter frown.

"We should be eating something yummier today, since we have the princess with us." grumbled Suzune, unhappy with their usual meal of boiled barley and rice paired with pickled vegetables. Now that she was awake, the three of them were having breakfast.

"Aw, c'mon. Don't be like that," Jinta said.

"It's because you have no life skills," she complained.

"Don't think I won't bonk you on the head." The fact was, Jinta couldn't cook, so it was a neighbor who made them the boiled barley and rice alongside their own meals. To hear the truth so directly from Suzune made him a little cross.

Byakuya watched the siblings bicker. With a big grin, she whispered, "Not like you could."

"What's that?" Jinta challenged.

"You're too sweet. There's no way you'd ever hit Suzu-chan," she said, not backing down. She seemed to think he was too doting to properly reprimand his sister.

With a grumble, he replied, “I’ll admit, I do dote on Suzu-chan a bit. But I can still reprimand her as her brother when necessary, even raising a hand if I must.”

“Uh-huh, sure,” she said, clearly unconvinced. She munched on her pickled vegetables, plainly ignoring his words.

“There’s no way Jinta could do all that...” Suzune said, scooting next to Byakuya. The two whispered just loud enough for Jinta to hear, occasionally stealing glances at him.

“Oh, you think so too, Suzu-chan?” Byakuya said.

“Mhm. That’s just how Jinta is.”

“I’ll bonk you both on your heads, I swear,” he said.

There was something nostalgic about it all. The three had similar conversations countless times as children. Of course, Jinta knew the two were just joking around. He also understood that he wasn’t a child anymore, and so he maturely returned to his meal with a stoic calmness.

“Wanna try it then? Go ahead, bonk me.”

Flummoxed, Jinta looked over to see his younger sister leaning her small head in his direction. He thought, *This girl’s seriously disrespecting me. It’s about time I set her straight.*

He tightened his fist just a bit, and Suzune looked him straight in the eye. Slowly, like a tangled lace coming undone, her face eased into a soft smile.

That was checkmate, and in a single move. He let his fist fall back onto his lap.

“You were saying?” Byakuya teased.

“...Well, it’s not like she’s actually done anything bad,” he replied.

“Right, right.” She grinned, seeing straight through him.

Not once had he ever been able to get the upper hand against Byakuya—or Suzune, for that matter. He sighed, face-to-face with the fact that he was still as weak now as he had been in the past.

“Take care!” Suzune shouted energetically, seeing them off at the entrance to their home with a beaming smile. The moment they’d finished breakfast, she had hurried Jinta into getting ready to depart.

“...You seem happy,” Jinta said, finding it somewhat odd that his sister was so upbeat.

“That’s ‘cause I am! You’re spending the whole day with Princess, right? I’m happy for you!”

“Why are *you* happy about that?”

“Because you’re my favorite person in the whole wide world! Your happiness is my happiness!”

Do I look that happy being with Byakuya? Jinta thought with a blush. He wanted to ask her more about it but figured it would be a bit tasteless to spoil his sister’s mood at this point. “I, um, see... Sorry we’re leaving you home alone like this, though.”

“It’s fine! Go have fun!” She waved her hand madly, so Jinta waved gently back.

Good grief... The energy in that girl, he thought.

“She’s such a sweet girl,” Byakuya said.

He agreed, but he also wished his sister would sometimes prioritize her own desires. Still, he would take her up on her selflessness for today and enjoy this rare chance with Shirayuki. The pair shared a grin and began to amble away from the house. They were too far out of range to hear Suzune sadly murmur, “Have fun...”

“Oh, Jinta-sama. Who’s the lady?” The pair were strolling along the road when two passing men called out to them. They recognized Jinta, the protector of the village, of course, but were surprised to see him walking hand in hand with an unfamiliar young woman. The pair had already been stopped frequently, and met with the same look of surprise and teasing comments each time. It was honestly starting to wear on Jinta, but he didn’t let it show.

He answered, “An old acquaintance.”

“It’s been a long time since I last visited, so he’s showing me around,” Byakuya added.

Technically, neither statement was a lie. Byakuya *was* an old acquaintance, and it *had* been a long time since she’d last visited.

“Oh, good for you, Jinta-sama. You found yourself quite the catch. We were getting worried since there was no talk of romance with you.”

“Goodness, to think you’ve grown this much. Why, I remember when you were just a little boy running around. Oh, how time flies.”

The two men nodded to themselves, reminiscing on the past. What with Kadono being so small, the kinship between villagers was strong and so they could tease Jinta like this. Byakuya took it a step further, hugging Jinta’s arm as though they were actually an item. “You hear that? I’m quite the catch.”

Blushing in surprise, Jinta looked downwards, only to see her looking up with an impish smile. But to bystanders, they looked like a true couple. The two men watched on with warm smiles.

“Hey—”

“Nope.” She shot him down before he could even tell her to let go.

Having his arm hugged in front of others was a bit too embarrassing for Jinta, but he could also feel her body heat directly, although her chest was a bit flat, so the sensation wasn’t quite so soft.

“You were thinking something rude just now, weren’t you?” she accused, pinching him in the side.

“Give me a break.” Her pinch did nothing to his muscular physique, but it did cause emotional damage.

“So not even a shrine maiden guardian can stand against his woman. Poor boy’s on a short leash. Not that there’s anything wrong with that, no, no. Why, I’d even say that’s the secret to a long, happy marriage.”

“Oh dear. Chitose will cry when she learns of this. Perhaps even the princess will be heartbroken as well.”

The men made a final few teasing remarks before going on their way, satisfied. Jinta felt even more exhausted than he did after fighting demons, but he was a bit relieved as well. Shirayuki's identity hadn't been discovered. "... Said princess is right here, though," he muttered.

"What'd I tell you? None the wiser."

He hadn't expected things to go this well, though the fact that nobody recognized her gnawed at him. He mused, "Well, there's no point thinking too deeply about it."

"Right, right, don't worry about it!" she said, as she drew even closer to him. Her comforting scent became all that much clearer, making his heart race a tad.

"Oh, Jinta-sama! Wel...come?"

The pair visited Kadono's only teahouse. Normally, an iron town like Kadono wouldn't have such an establishment, but a shrine maiden guardian many generations ago had insisted on some form of recreation in the village and ordered it built. To this day, it remained one of Kadono's few relaxation spots.

"Hello, Chitose," Jinta said to the wide-eyed girl. The two had just seen each other the day before, after she reported spotting the demons, and here he was visiting her teahouse the very next day. Jinta didn't really come by the teahouse much. After things grew strained between Chitose and Suzune, he naturally found himself visiting less and less.

The unexpectedness of his visit, paired with the sight of an unfamiliar woman by his side, shocked Chitose. "Um, who might this lady be?" she asked.

"An acquaintance of mine," he answered. "Please, don't ask any further."

"Right..." she said, unconvinced. "Oh, u-um, sorry. Your order?"

Byakuya's hand shot up. "Give us, uh...ten dango skewers!"

"Make that just two. And tea, please," Jinta corrected.

"Whaaat," Byakuya complained.

"You want to eat yourself sick again?" Byakuya tended to overeat when it

came to sweets, perhaps because she rarely had the opportunity to eat them. However, she wasn't usually a big eater, so she always suffered stomach pains after loading up on sweets and ended up in need of that digestive medicine made from boiled chickweed. Having seen her suffer for her own gluttony more times than he cared to count, Jinta intervened posthaste.

"Right... Er, I'll get that for you right away...sir. Father!"

"Yep, heard it!"

Chitose's father responded with loud enthusiasm, and she disappeared into the teashop.

Byakuya watched her leave, then whispered, "Huh, so not even Chitose realized."

There was a tinge of sadness in her passing comment. Chitose had been Suzune's close friend, and the two had played with Byakuya every now and then. She was a bit sad to see a former friend fail to recognize her.

"Don't blame her. She hasn't seen your face in years."

"I know, but still..." She understood Chitose wasn't at fault but felt miffed all the same.

The two sat on the bench in front of the shop. Jinta studied her out of the corner of his eye. Her expression was clouded, and she kicked her legs like a pouting child.

"Here's your order!"

In no time at all, Chitose returned with a small tray in one hand, which she placed on the bench. It held a pair of teacups, two dango skewers, and a small plate of something else.

"What's this?" Jinta asked.

"Isobe mochi. It was your favorite, right?" Chitose answered.

Jinta could generally only eat mochi around New Years. Maybe it was because of this rarity that, whenever he was asked what kind of food he liked, his answer was always mochi. His favorite kind of mochi was isobe mochi, which featured in many of his treasured memories. He recalled mentioning his

fondness for it to Chitose a long time ago.

“I’m surprised you remembered,” he said, eyes wide. The isobe mochi was a treat specifically meant for her old friend “Jinta-nii,” not the shrine maiden guardian he was now.

Chitose met his words with an awkward smile. She nodded vigorously and said, “Y-yes. By chance, we just happened to have some on hand, so I figured I’d serve it.”

“Chitose... Thank you.”

“Please, um, enjoy.” Chitose disappeared back into the shop again.

A slight smile graced Jinta’s face. He was happy for the isobe mochi, of course, but more so it was the fact that she’d remembered that got to him.

“It’s not fair only you get special treatment,” Byakuya said with a huff, puffing up her cheeks as she ate her dango skewer. The fact Chitose remembered Jinta’s favorite food but didn’t recognize her at all seemed to bother her.

“Like I said, it’s been years since she’s seen you.”

“I know, but it still doesn’t sit right with me... And is it just me or was she a little stiff with you?”

Byakuya seemed to find Chitose’s awkward attempts at formal language off-putting. So did Jinta, but he knew Chitose’s reasons. “It’s because I’m no longer ‘Jinta-nii’ to her but ‘Jinta-sama’ now.”

“Ah... I see.” She frowned.

Their statuses were different now. They were no longer the children they had been. While a shrine maiden guardian was not so revered as Itsukihime, his was still a role that demanded respect.

“Heh, I kinda get how it feels to be you now,” he joked with a shrug, partly in an attempt to wash this all away.

Understanding his intent, she joked back, “It’s about time you did, Jinta-sama.”

“Ha ha. Quit it.”

Itsukihime. Shrine maiden guardian. In different ways, the two had both lost the freedom to be themselves. They could no longer return to the days they had lived without a care. Motoharu's pet phrase rang all the more true now: Nothing that exists is changeless.

Jinta murmured, "Nothing ever remains as it is, huh?" *Not myself, and not the world around me.*

Byakuya said nothing in reply. She knew that cruel truth better than anyone.

After the shrine, the second-most conspicuous place in the village was a large building simply known as the Workshop. The Workshop was where all the iron was made, so it was equipped with a large kiln. Iron was made by putting iron sand and tatara charcoal into the kiln and running the foot-powered bellows for several days nonstop. Naturally, the inside of the Workshop was feverishly hot. You could feel the heat just by approaching the building.

"Wanna go in?"

"Mmm... I'll pass. I don't want to be a bother." Byakuya gave the distant Workshop one last glance before walking the opposite way with a joyful look on her face. They could hear the voices of the men manning the bellows, their chant indiscernible but their fervor rivaling the heat of the kiln.

"You seem happy," Jinta said.

"I am. I'm glad to see the village my mother protected is still well." With light, rhythmic steps, she hopped onward. She seemed happy enough to start humming if left be. Byakuya continued, "You know, I really like that Kadono makes iron. Because to make good iron, you need the efforts of many people... I'd be thrilled if my being Itsukihime somehow helped all these people, if only a little bit." She seemed more mature than usual as she said that, and more beautiful too.

I love the Kadono my mother protected. I want to be its strength if I can. The words she'd said that day, long ago, held true even now. She would pray for the happiness of others as though it were only expected of her. Of course, that noble will of hers was the precise reason Jinta had sworn to protect her.

“Don’t be so modest,” he said. “You’re the pillar of Kadono. Everyone feels reassured by your presence.”

“He he, thank you. But I could say the same about you.”

“Well, I don’t know about that...”

“What’re you saying, Jinta-sama? Don’t tell me you’re embarrassed?”

“Hey, enough of that! Seriously!”

The two strolled in peace amid the familiar surroundings. Jinta felt he was beginning to understand what it was that Yokaze had toiled to nurture and Motoharu had strived to protect. This old, unchanging village must have been terribly dear to them. Serving Kadono gave them a small, all too commonplace happiness, but one so dazzling to Jinta’s eyes.

“Hey, should we...?”

“Yeah. Let’s go see Mother and Father.”

On some instinct, their gazes met at the same moment. Byakuya smiled. They understood where their next destination would be without speaking a word. It was time to visit Yokaze and Motoharu’s resting place.

Cremation was traditional in Kadono, as fire was sacred to the iron-producing village. The flames of cremation purified the remains of the dead. The resulting bones would then be crushed into ash and scattered deep within Irazu Forest to nurture the trees. The trees would later be harvested and turned into tatara charcoal. Finally, the tatara charcoal was used to produce new iron. Such were funerals in Kadono—not merely a mourning of the dead but a ritual of death and rebirth through fire.

This same ritual was used for all who played the role of Itsukihime and their shrine maiden guardians. This also meant that they had no grave to visit. The best one could do was gaze at Irazu Forest and think of the dead.

“No going in though,” Jinta warned.

“I know, I know.”

With things how they were, Jinta wanted to avoid Byakuya entering the forest. She understood this and settled for gazing from a distance.

“A chance like this probably won’t come again. I’m glad I came,” she said. Her parents’ ashes were scattered deep within the forest before them, giving the place special personal meaning. Of course, it was special to Jinta as well. It had been several years, so their ashes would be one with the soil by now. Even so, he felt sentimental looking at the forest.

“Do you ever come here?” she asked.

“Sometimes.”

“I see.”

He wasn’t the type to recite prayers for the well-being of souls, but he did occasionally find himself walking to Irazu Forest on a whim. Motoharu had adopted him, and Yokaze had arranged for him to live in Kadono. He owed them both a lot. Motoharu had even become his sword mentor, as well as his predecessor as a shrine maiden guardian. Jinta respected that aloof yet unshakable man from the depths of his heart.

“You really liked my father, didn’t you?”

“I wouldn’t say ‘liked.’ He was my sword mentor. I respected him.”

Jinta didn’t hate his *real* father. He had been strict but kind, as a good father should, but Jinta could never accept his father’s abuse towards Suzune. In that regard, Jinta truly admired Motoharu’s way. “Nothing that exists is changeless...”

“Oh, that’s what Father always used to say.”

“Yeah. Motoharu-san’s lessons may have been difficult, and frankly often incomprehensible, but he always tried to teach me something important.”

Once, so long ago that Jinta couldn’t even remember when, Motoharu said, *“All can change with time: the seasons, the sights, the days we take for granted, and even our hearts that have sworn eternal vows. No matter how sad or painful a truth it may be, change is inevitable.”*

“Nothing that exists is changeless.”

Perhaps Motoharu himself hated change more than anyone else. Maybe that was why he tried so hard to resist it. Jinta felt he'd finally stepped beyond his younger self, now that he could appreciate Motoharu's actions.

"I feel like I've always been trying to catch up with that man," he said.

Even now, after becoming a shrine maiden guardian and growing much stronger, he still felt he didn't measure up to Motoharu. He wasn't bitter about it, however. That was simply how much respect he felt for the man.

"Ha ha, oh really?"

"Hm? Why'd you laugh?"

"I'm happy. Who wouldn't be when their father's being praised?" Byakuya smiled from the heart, then turned her back to Irazu Forest and looked to Kadono. "I hope we can keep this unchanging village just as it is, like Father and Mother did."

Jinta couldn't help but let a small smile slip. He felt tingly inside at the thought that he was able to share the same dream with her...but then his second father's last words surfaced in his mind: *Jinta. Become a man who can cherish his hatred.* Just what exactly had Motoharu meant by that?

After reminiscing about Yokaze and Motoharu a little, the pair wandered the village, making meaningless small talk every now and then. They had no goal in mind, and the village was scant on entertainment in the first place. Even so, Byakuya was greatly enjoying herself, in high spirits perhaps because this was her first outing in so long. Jinta let himself be swept along by her mood and enjoyed the day to the fullest, feeling as though they'd returned to their youth.

But still, one fact gnawed at him: Byakuya had a habit of forcing herself to act in high spirits to avoid talking about something difficult.

The sun sank below the horizon, and the sky darkened to the orange of sunset. Now tired and sweaty from all their walking, the pair left the village to cool off. They arrived at a hill overlooking the Modori River, the very place they

once dreamed of the distant future together.

“The wind feels nice...” Byakuya mused. The warm evening breeze caressed her pale skin and raced through her lovely black hair. The wind threaded through the leaves, rustling, making a sound like rippling waves. “Thanks for today.”

“Not at all. I had fun as well,” Jinta replied.

“Oh, thank goodness. I was worried I was being too selfish when I asked for all this.”

“Why? It’s not like your selfish whims are anything new.”

“Rude.”

Her expression began to cloud. Her earlier carefree demeanor disappeared, leaving behind a girl who looked like she’d disappear if struck by a light breeze.

The amber sun reflected off the river in winking shimmers of light, sharp against the eye.

“Do you feel ready now?” Jinta asked calmly. Byakuya understood what he meant: It was time to lay bare what she’d been keeping hidden.

“...Yes.” Her voice was somber. A silence hung for a moment, but she eventually worked up her resolve and turned her gaze from the river to Jinta. She faced him head-on, without flinching, her eyes filled with an unwavering determination. “I wanted to tell you here, the place where it all began for me. Will you listen to what I have to say?”

“...I will.”

“I see. Thank you.” She smiled, but it was merely a shape her lips took. No happiness graced her face.

The wind blew strongly again. Byakuya looked as though she would melt and become one with the sky, which felt so much closer from atop their small hill.

Perhaps that was her wish, to melt away into the sky. To become as empty as the endless expanse.

Half in tears, but still determined, she smiled again and said, “I’m going to

marry Kiyomasa.”

IN KADONO, even though Itsukihime was called “Princess,” she wasn’t actually of royal descent. The term simply came from the “hime” of Itsukihime, which commonly meant “princess” in the Japanese language. Originally, however, the “hime” of Itsukihime meant “Woman of Fire,” and the full title meant “the pure Woman of Fire.” Purity referred to the fact that the one who served the Goddess of Fire had to be an unmarried young girl, or so it had once been. As time passed, that notion faded, and now most who became Itsukihime remained in the role even after bearing children, as the late Yokaze had. With time, the meaning of “Itsukihime” simply became “one who prayed to the Goddess of Fire.”

Byakuya hadn’t said anything untoward. Even though she was Itsukihime, she could still marry. Jinta understood that. All the same, his chest grew tight on this evening in the early summer.

Byakuya continued, “It was decided yesterday morning. The chief said that, with the demons after me, I need to bear a successor before I end up like my predecessor. Kiyomasa was chosen as my spouse, as he’s a shrine maiden guardian and will one day be village chief. There’s no better pairing for Kadono’s future...or so he said.”

Jinta recalled the day before and how he had been asked to report to the shrine later than usual. Now he knew why. The village chief wanted his son to marry Byakuya and had removed Jinta, the only other potential candidate, so he could announce the marriage to everyone.

She continued, “I tried mentioning that the one I bore a child with didn’t necessarily have to be Kiyomasa, that there was another candidate...but he said it couldn’t be you, Jinta, because you don’t carry Kadono blood.”

Though it tore at him to hear this, Jinta understood the wisdom behind it. It wasn’t unusual for the Itsukihime to marry a shrine maiden guardian. But if one had to choose between a shrine maiden guardian who’d drifted into the village and one who’d been born into it, the choice was obvious. What was more, it would be a union between the one who prayed for the land’s prosperity and

the next in line to govern that same land. They were perfect partners for each other. The village chief had likely made Kiyomasa a shrine maiden guardian with the intent to have him marry Byakuya from the start.

In other words, this plan had been set in motion half a year ago, with the necessary groundwork undoubtedly already laid. The encroaching demon attack only further cemented things, leaving Byakuya in no position to refuse.

She continued, “The chief said this is what’s best for the people of Kadono, and I couldn’t help but agree. So, I chose to accept the marriage.” Those were the magic words to use against Byakuya. Her Achilles’ heel. She would do *anything* for Kadono’s sake, no matter how absurd. Having been with her for so long, Jinta knew that fact painfully well. He fully understood that she didn’t oppose this political marriage but instead approved of it. He also understood that she liked Kiyomasa enough to accept him as her husband.

“Jinta. There’s something I need to tell you. Right now, while I’m still Shirayuki.”

The back of his head prickled, painfully hot. A numbing, dizzying sense of vertigo overtook him. But he didn’t look away. As long as he could sense her determination, he could not look away.

“I love you, Jinta.”

He knew. She wasn’t in a position to say it, but he had always known she had feelings for him.

“But I have to live as Byakuya from now on. I can never be Shirayuki again.”

He knew this as well. He knew she would always, until the bitter end, choose to live for duty and not for love. She would pray for the happiness of Kadono, even if she herself wasn’t happy. That was a decision she’d made long ago, likely here on this very hill. From the day she’d sworn to become Itsukihime, he had known.

“I am Itsukihime, the shrine maiden of fire who prays for Kadono’s prosperity. I chose my path, and I cannot abandon it.”

The one he called Shirayuki was gone. Before him now was the unwavering Woman of Fire.

“I really loved you, Jinta. I’ve even thought, just a little, about what it’d be like to run away with you to someplace far away, where nobody knows us, where we could become husband and wife and live quietly.” She stuck her tongue out playfully. The old Shirayuki was still within her.

“Husband and wife, huh? That wouldn’t be half bad.”

For that old Shirayuki, Jinta tried his hardest to sound like he was okay. Even though he knew it was meaningless, he wanted to continue this conversation with her for just a little longer.

“Right? We’d be a harmonious couple, always all over one another. We’d even have a kid one day and become a mother and father.” She looked so calm now in profile. Her eyes gazed at something in the distance, perhaps the beautiful life she desired—or maybe something else? Jinta followed her gaze but only met empty sky. He couldn’t see what she saw. She continued, “Our family would get bigger, and we’d slowly grow older. We’d spend our final days as a happy elderly couple, sipping tea together. Wouldn’t that be nice?” She knew such a peaceful future was beyond her reach, yet she looked so happy envisioning it. “Ah... If only.”

Jinta indulged in the fantasy as well, a smile surfacing. Growing old with her would be nice. They would surely be happy.

“But you wouldn’t run away with me, would you, Jinta?” she said, not as a question seeking an answer but to confirm what she already knew.

Her words cut through him sharp as a blade. If he took Byakuya’s hand now and abandoned Kadono, a happy future surely awaited them. But he couldn’t do that. He had already abandoned everything he had once, on that rainy night so long ago, in exchange for a small happiness.

Motoharu gave him and his sister a second chance at life. Yokaze officially accepted them into the village. Shirayuki called them family. The villagers welcomed them without complaint. Before he knew it, the place he drifted to had become his one and only home.

“...You’re right. I won’t... I can’t,” he said. He had grown to love Kadono too much to abandon it all for his own happiness.

“Is that because you don’t love me back?” she asked.

“Of course not.” He had always loved her. He wanted to stay by her side forever. He wanted to marry her and live a peaceful life with her, somewhere far away. His heart longed for such a fantasy, but he couldn’t bring himself to say the four simple words that would make it a reality: *Let’s run away together.*

It wasn’t because he loved Kadono more than her. It was because he couldn’t trample over her determination. She was willing to throw her own happiness away for the future of Kadono. How could he ever suggest they just run away?

“Shirayuki, I love you too,” he confessed. A scene from the past surfaced in his mind. Before a river full of stars, the two stood shoulder to shoulder, looking up at the night sky, and exchanged a small wish. On that day, she said she’d become Itsukihime and still smiled, knowing full well she’d never be Shirayuki again. She abandoned her own happiness and chose a life devoted to the needs of others. Many would call such a decision foolish, but he knew it was noble. She had lost her parents, would soon lose her own identity, and could still find it in her to pray for the happiness of others. He loved her precisely because that was the kind of person she was.

He continued, “But the one I swore to protect wasn’t Shirayuki, it was Byakuya. I polished my sword skills to protect not my friend but the one who awed me with her determination to succeed her mother as Itsukihime.”

Jinta’s wish for strength came from a desire to give some peace to his childhood friend who chose to live for others. Swinging a sword was all he was good for, but the one he protected could go on and create a better world for everyone. That belief was what carried him this far, and it remained his pillar still.

“I’m sure we’d find happiness in getting married and living together, but it’d be at the cost of all the determination you’ve ever shown. I respect the sacrifice you’ve made too much and don’t want to deny all I’ve been training for either. So, I can’t run away with you.” Long ago, he had witnessed the beauty of her determination. He couldn’t destroy that all now. If any part of him *truly* loved her, then he wouldn’t dare sully who she was. A vow made must remain a vow kept.

“What am I saying? I sound like such a fool,” he mumbled. That was from his true self and not the shrine maiden guardian he was.

Byakuya smiled at his genuine outburst and let out a happy sigh, then said, “That you do. But I’m glad. You’re still the same person I thought you were.”

Even though he knew she would marry Kiyomasa, Jinta showed no jealousy at all. That lack of possessiveness might upset some, but she only felt relief. “In the end you’re just the same as me,” she said. “We both chose to stick to the way of life we’ve committed to instead of acting on our feelings for one another. But that’s exactly what I love about you.” The melting dawn glowed around her unwavering form. Jinta couldn’t look away. The radiant beauty he had seen long ago was still right there in her.

She said, “I can’t bring myself to run away with you either. I mean, I’m the one who decided to become Itsukihime in the first place, right? I can’t let that become a lie. I wouldn’t be able to look you in the eye if I did. The me in your heart would become a lie as well, so it’s better I remain Itsukihime.”

An abrupt gust of wind blew, and her black hair swayed.

She said, “I pray the person I am in your heart will be loved by you for all eternity.”

That was her reply to his confession.

The two of them had been by one another’s sides since their youth. They knew each other better than anyone, dreamed the same future, looked up to the same people. They were alike in many ways because they’d always been together. But nothing that exists is changeless. Though their hearts remained close, time had passed them by, and they could no longer return to their days of youthful innocence. So instead, they confessed their love for one another, then agreed that would be the end.

“I see,” he said. “In exchange, I’ll continue to protect you as your shrine maiden guardian.” Even if they weren’t bound in holy matrimony, he would stay by her side.

His feelings came through, whether he voiced them directly or not. Her eyes moistened a bit, but still she put on a smile as clear as the water’s surface. “...

Thank you.”

Her smile was beautiful—beautiful enough to reassure Jinta that he’d made the right choice. Of course, the meaning behind her smile was clear as day to him.

This was the end of *them*. He would no longer be the one by her side. From now on, she would smile for another man.

That pained him. No matter how hard he tried to deny it, his heart wouldn’t lie to him. Yet he was strangely calm. Both of them had something they couldn’t give up and ultimately stuck with it. Even if their love never came to be, they had made their feelings known. Because of that, he could accept this end.

Nothing that exists is changeless. Seasons pass one by, landscapes shift, eras rise and fall, townscapes alter, and feelings once sworn eternal fade. All is meaningless before time, no matter how sad or painful a truth that may be.

And yet, he saw beauty in her that day—that fact remained.

What he felt now, as the one he loved grew distant, wasn’t sadness or despair. His heart had once found beauty in her smile and determination, and it still remembered that. What his younger self had sworn to protect was still worth protecting. It brought a smile to his face. Much had changed over the years, but the aspirations of his youth were still with him, so surely their love that couldn’t bear fruit was not a mistake.

Byakuya stretched her arms and heaved a big sigh. “Welp, I just got dumped.”

“Huh? Aren’t I the one who got dumped?”

“What are you talking about? I don’t remember doing any dumping.”

“Well, I don’t either.”

Meaningless banter flowed between them. They knew that it didn’t matter who dumped who, but argued anyway. They didn’t want this moment to end, for they knew another like it would never come.

They continued to bicker lightly, careful to not bring things to a close, but they gradually ran out of things to say and sank into silence. As the sun’s last rays peeked over the horizon, only the sound of flowing water remained.

After some time, Byakuya looked up at the sky and said, with vivid emotion, “I see. Then it was my stubborn, unwilling-to-change self who dumped me.” In that moment, she looked as though she would melt away into the wind. Her transient aura was too dazzling for Jinta to look at directly.

“Yeah. You and me both.” His reply was brief but full of self-reflection.

The two had shared their feelings and were in love with one another. But they chose to not be together for the sake of their vows, the paths they’d chosen, and, most of all, the respect the other person had for them.

To think that love could meet such an end.

They would have found happiness being together. But they could not depart from the way of life they clung to.

“We’ve come a long way, you and I,” Jinta said.

“Yeah. We can’t go back again, though.”

The promise they’d exchanged in their youth still remained with them, but hearts change. They couldn’t stay young forever.

Before they knew it, the sun had set completely and a thin veil of darkness descended. The indigo-tinted river was the same hue as it had been that night they’d dreamed of their future, yet the scenery was no longer the same. Something had changed.

“Shall we return then, Jinta?” she said with a soft smile. She spoke as Byakuya, Shirayuki now gone.

“As you wish.” Jinta vanished as well, and a loyal shrine maiden guardian took his place.

What exactly had changed would forever remain unclear, but the stars they looked up to now certainly shone a little dimmer than they had before.

At the break of dawn, a report came in. The demons had been found.

“AS YOU WISH. I shall assume my duty as demon hunter.”

The demons were in a cave in the woods to the north, just as the muscular demon had told Jinta they would be. The report came at the break of dawn, so Jinta was summoned to the shrine first thing in the morning.

Byakuya was devoid of emotion as she handed him his task. Jinta clenched his fists, knowing that she was trying her hardest to be Itsukihime. He swore to match her determination by acting as her shrine maiden guardian and slaying the two demons.

She said, “There exists a possibility the female demon might attack Kadono independently. Kiyomasa will face her if that happens, so do not worry about Kadono. Focus solely on your duty.”

“Of course.” Jinta put a fist against the ground and respectfully lowered his head. He then stood to depart.

Sitting by the bamboo screen was Kiyomasa, the man who would wed Byakuya. Jinta didn’t get along with him, and truthfully envied him because of the marriage, but he had chosen his path.

He exhaled softly, then filled his lungs with the tranquil air of the shrine. It did the trick—his heart was now calmer than he thought possible. Nothing had changed; this was just another one of his usual demon-hunting missions, and Kiyomasa was protecting Itsukihime while he was out, as he always did. There was no need to be so worked up, he told himself. He forced himself to relax, and, with no hidden intent, he said, “Kiyomasa, take care of the princess.”

“...Don’t worry, I know.”

Jinta had expected one of Kiyomasa’s usual snarky quips but was instead met with a quiet, subdued murmur. Surprised, he looked at Kiyomasa, who quickly averted his gaze, teeth clenched. Jinta had no idea what had come over the man.

“I pray your battle is met with fortune,” Byakuya’s cool voice said.

Though Jinta was curious about Kiyomasa's behavior, there was no point looking into it now. He drove the nagging thought out of his head and left the shrine.

"Hey, wait!"

As he was about to pass under the torii gate outside the shrine, a hand grabbed Jinta's shoulder from behind. He turned around to find Kiyomasa glaring daggers at him.

"Why didn't you say anything?" he said.

"About what?" Jinta replied.

"You know exactly what!" he yelled. He gritted his teeth, fuming. Jinta had been harassed by Kiyomasa numerous times before, but never like this. "Didn't you hear about Byakuya and me?"

"...Oh, that. Yeah, the princess told me herself," Jinta replied calmly.

His attitude seemed to grate on Kiyomasa, whose glare only grew more piercing. "So why won't you say anything about it? Didn't you love her?!"

Jinta recalled that Suzune had asked him something similar. Perhaps the way he and Byakuya thought was just that alien to others. A dry smile almost broke through on his face, but he suppressed it and said, "The princess has made her choice, and I accept it."

"You're seriously fine with this? What the hell are you thinking?"

"I think of nothing but peace for the princess and Kadono." Jinta was confused as to what Kiyomasa wanted. It was almost irritating. So, he poured oil onto the fire. "I won't oppose your marriage. Isn't that enough? What problem could you possibly have with this?"

Eyes clouded with anger, Kiyomasa grabbed Jinta's collar. "I'm seriously going to marry Byakuya! You're fine with that?"

"I already told you I am."

"You...!" Livid at the fact that Jinta wouldn't argue with him, Kiyomasa raised

a fist. But he didn't swing it. Instead he trembled, as though trying his hardest to suppress his overflowing emotions.

"Let me go."

In the end, Kiyomasa didn't act. Seeing that Jinta would not so much as flinch, he let go, hung his head, and bitterly grit his teeth. He muttered, "There's something wrong with you..."

Jinta seemed indifferent to someone else marrying the one he loved, choosing meaningless values over romance. From an outsider's perspective, there certainly was something wrong with him. But he couldn't forfeit his way of life now. He wouldn't dare sully Byakuya's beautiful determination, even if it meant death. Of course, Jinta knew full well how foolish he was being, so he laughed weakly. "Yeah. I think so as well."

The wind taken out of his sails, Kiyomasa said nothing in reply. Jinta ignored him, fixed his clothes, and crossed under the torii gate.

"Jinta, welcome home!"

Before setting out, Jinta returned home for a quick pit stop. It wasn't like he was going off to war, but he still needed to prepare for the coming battle.

"Hey, Suzune. Anything happen while I was out?"

"Nope."

"I see. That's good, I guess."

Suzune greeted him with a wide grin, as always. Her sweet innocence soothed his aching heart a bit. Now calmer, he began gearing up.

"Is work over for today?"

"No, I've been given demon-hunting duties. I'll be heading out after doing some preparation."

"What...? Again?"

He checked the condition of his equipment: sword, scabbard, clothes, and sandals. All passable. Lastly, he fastened his sword to the side of his waist, then

stiffly addressed his sullen sister. "Sorry. You'll be home alone for a while again."

"I'm okay with that, but..." Her voice trailed off. There was danger in fighting the inhuman. She could endure staying home alone, but the possibility of Jinta getting hurt frightened her. Dissatisfaction and worry mixed in a jumble as she looked at him with an indescribable expression.

"I'll be back soon. Don't worry," he said.

She pouted. "You always say that and then don't come back for days..."

Having the truth pointed out hurt. He understood her grumbling came from worry, which he appreciated. But he couldn't stray from his duty no matter how adorable she was, so he said nothing but a quick "sorry," then made for the entrance. "Take care of the house while I'm gone," he added.

"...Stay safe." She likely had more complaints but held them back so he could leave unburdened. She wore an easy smile, though he could see right through it.

He said, "Don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

"I will worry... I have every right to." Her shaky voice tugged at his heartstrings.

When he thought about it, he had left her alone like this countless times, using the fact that he was a shrine maiden guardian or had a duty to hunt demons as an excuse. With her demon blood, Suzune never really mixed with other people, so she was always left by herself. She must have been unbearably lonely. But she never once asked Jinta to stay. Of course, he wasn't so stupid that he didn't understand why.

"I'll be okay," he said. Before he knew it, he was on one knee, at her eye level, patting his sister's head.

"J-Jinta?" Embarrassed, she blushed and squirmed.

Jinta knew he was a terrible excuse for a brother, that the reassurance he gave now was no atonement for what he'd done, but he hoped he could at least give her some peace. He said, "Don't worry. I'll come back, I swear."

“...Really?”

“Really. You can trust in your brother,” he stated definitively. He felt her tense slightly. Thinking the head pats were getting a bit embarrassing for them both, he stopped and stood up.

Slowly, Suzune raised her gaze to him and said, “All right. I’ll wait for you, because I’m your sister. I’ll always be here waiting for you to come home.” A soft, warm smile spread across her youthful face. But Jinta thought he saw a hint of maturity flash through her expression.

“Suzune?” Feeling like she was somehow slipping away from him, he called her name.

“Yeah?” she replied, confused.

She was just as she always was. It had probably been his imagination. “No, it’s nothing. I’ll be going then.”

“Okay. Take care!”

He left for Irazu Forest. Suzune vigorously waved goodbye to him like always, but the ever-so-slight unease in him didn’t fade. A mysterious, undefinable discomfort remained like a fish bone stuck in his throat.

The leaves overlapped and formed a canopy roof, and the oppressive smell of rich greenery filled the air. Irazu Forest was cut off from the world, its tranquil peace unpierced by early summer’s soft rays. Occasionally, the warbling of birds could be heard, and the leaves would rustle as though singing in reply. The sheer silence stood in stark contrast to these infrequent sounds. In the dimness, the soil remained damp and made walking a chore. It was not ever a barrier to Jinta, who proceeded in silence on the small trail.

The sun was about to peak. Jinta wanted to finish his battle with the demons while there was still daylight. Worry clung to him. This time, he would face two demons at once, and since they’d deliberately told him their location, he could be walking into a disadvantageous two-on-one. Or one demon could stall him while the other attacked Kadono. Both scenarios were equally possible. If the latter, the one stalling him would most assuredly be the larger, muscular

demon. Though that creature was strong, Jinta was confident he could make quick work of him, one-on-one. The female demon didn't seem like much of a fighter, so Kiyomasa and the men of the village could likely deal with her through overwhelming numbers. The problem, however, would be in the first scenario, the two-on-one confrontation. Jinta didn't know if he would lose even if outnumbered two to one, but he wasn't so confident he would be victorious either.

"Which will it be, then?" Jinta half-heartedly muttered to himself. In the end, there was no point in overanalyzing. Worrying wouldn't change a thing. Either way, his goal would remain the same: kill all the demons. As the saying went, needless worry bred needless unrest. Time spent fretting could be better used focusing on the coming fight.

Jinta made his way through the dense undergrowth as he continued to sharpen his senses. Eventually, he came into view of the appointed cave. He saw nothing that resembled a trap, but he still entered with caution. As his feet trod across the rugged and stony surface, he peered carefully into the darkness.

There was a faint light. He moved towards it, heading deeper into the cave, which opened up into a large, spacious area. The light came from numerous torches, presumably put up by the demons, that dimly lit the area. A peculiar burnt smell, like rotten eggs, offended Jinta's nose. Whether that smell was from the torches' sulfur or the demons' last victim, he did not know.

"So, you've come, human." Standing inside was a single demon.

"...Just you, huh?"

"The other's gone off to Kadono."

"I see," Jinta mused as he put his left hand on his scabbard. He popped the blade from the mouth of the scabbard and glared, ready for the demon to make a move. He remained vigilant even as he spoke. He could not face this opponent while distracted.

"You don't seem very surprised."

"It's all within expectations. Don't underestimate the people of Kadono. They're not so weak as to lose to a demon like her." Jinta slowly drew his blade

and assumed a stance with his sword horizontal at his right side.

In response, the demon clenched his fists, then assumed a stance with his right arm thrust forward. **“How frightening. Then I better go back her up as soon as possible.”**

“I wouldn’t underestimate me either. I think you’ll find my life isn’t so easily forfeit.”

The small talk ended there. The two lunged forth simultaneously, as though it were all prearranged, signaling the start of their deathmatch.

Jinta lowered his stance, dropping his center of gravity to give himself the stability of a firmly rooted tree. He pushed through his feet, deep into the earth, transferring momentum from his knees to his hips as he swung his torso. The force of it magnified along his hips, up to his shoulders, and then finally out through his arms, culminating in a finely honed downward diagonal slash.

The long Kadono tachi blade, paired with Jinta’s combat-honed sword skills, easily tore through the demon’s flesh—but the demon didn’t so much as flinch. He counterattacked immediately.

A fist sailed, no, *gouged* through the air. From his current stance, Jinta couldn’t move backwards to evade. Instead, he kicked forward with his right foot and got inside the demon’s swing, left shoulder first, maintaining his blade in a low position.

The demon’s fist passed by Jinta’s cheek. The force of the air swept along by its passage broke his skin, but he didn’t freeze. He tackled the demon’s chest with his left shoulder, ramming all his weight into his solar plexus.

“Grngh!” The demon groaned in pain, faltering a few paltry steps back.

But that was enough of an opening.

Jinta had rammed downwards with everything he had, but it was a miracle that the demon’s adamantine body had been affected at all, given their difference in physique. Still, the gambit worked, and Jinta would not allow an opening to slip by.

He lifted his sword overhead and stepped forward with his right foot as he

swung vertically down with a fierce shout—much like a blacksmith swinging their hammer.

He felt flesh sever, then bone rend. His target had been the demon's outstretched left arm. It fell and rolled unceremoniously on the ground. Once he saw the arm disconnect, Jinta turned his sword and swung for the demon's neck—but the demon wasn't that lax. He swung his other fist at Jinta from overhead, though the swing was slow, perhaps from the pain of losing an arm.

Jinta gave up his attack and retreated, creating distance between them once again. He flicked the blood off his sword and caught his breath. After more than ten moves, he was unharmed, save for the slight abrasion on his cheek. In contrast, the demon had a number of cuts. While the damage wasn't lethal, Jinta had even managed to lop off an arm. It was safe to say things were going well.

“To think, not a single one of my attacks landed. You're quite far removed from humanity.”

“You're one to talk.” Jinta assumed his stance again, calm but with an unwavering focus. Although things were going well for him, the demon still held the actual advantage. Jinta remained unscathed, but he could not choose otherwise. He simply *couldn't* afford to let a single attack land. A direct hit would spell instant death; a light graze would leave him fatally impaired. It was perfect victory or death. Nothing in between.

In contrast, the demon was hardy. His wounds as yet posed no mortal danger to him. To defeat him, Jinta needed to either take his neck or heart, or somehow crush his head. The demon knew that too, hence why he kept up the onslaught. Victory for Jinta would be a tightrope-balancing act, every nerve stretched to its limit.

Jinta exhaled sharply. Another exchange of sword and fist began.

He started with a diagonal slash. It struck air, but he followed up with a reverse-grip upward slash aimed at the demon's neck. The demon did not manage to dodge entirely but doggedly endured the blow that landed, then counterattacked. Jinta evaded the demon's punch, nearly kissing the ground before pushing off and transitioning into an upwards swing. To counter, the

demon swung his fist towards the ground.

Instead of retreating, Jinta stepped in again, appearing right before the demon's chest. The fist struck air, and Jinta's sword slashed across the demon's chest—but the blow was far from fatal. Jinta pulled back his right foot, turned his hip to the demon, and deftly kicked his abdomen with both legs. The resulting recoil pushed Jinta away.

The demon barely budged from the full-body kick. Jinta clicked his tongue. He could get hits in but couldn't land the fatal blow. If he wanted to end this, he'd have to get closer and risk getting hit.

“Humans never cease to entertain me,” the demon abruptly said, taking Jinta by surprise. He didn't expect to hear such a thing smack in the middle of a deathmatch, and said so calmly too. The demon gave an emotional sigh and continued, **“The life span of we demons easily exceeds a thousand years. I've lived my fair share of time and have partaken in my fair share of drinking matches as well. But I've yet to encounter any entertainment greater than mankind.”**

Jinta had met many spirits who looked down on humans as weak, or as food. This demon was different. He didn't belittle humans. He likened them to entertainment, but it wasn't in a mocking sense. He was genuinely just speaking his mind.

“Take human martial arts, for instance. Despite having bodies far weaker than our own, through martial arts you've learned to exceed us. You live frightfully short lives but pass on techniques that outlive us all. Humans defy destiny as though it were mere birthright. What could that be called if not entertaining?” The demon narrowed his eyes as though sucked into a trance, perhaps yearning for what humans had.

Certainly, Jinta had learned the sword from Motoharu, and Motoharu had learned from his own master, and that master had learned from their own master, and so on, ad nauseum. This martial art was taught, refined, and then passed on repeatedly, forming a long chain that extended from past to future.

The same process could be seen outside of martial arts as well. Humans achieved extraordinarily little in a single lifetime, but through many lives, across

much time, they could achieve greatness. To a demon with more natural strength than any human, and a life span greater than a thousand years, the sight of humans attempting greatness within their microscopic lives might just seem magical.

“I sincerely find humans entertaining. And so, I’ve been dying to ask.” The demon’s eyes changed, now sizing Jinta up, assessing him. **“Human, for what purpose do you wield your blade?”**

Jinta’s mind froze. To him, demons were nothing but creatures that threatened his village, his people. Now one was trying to *understand* him?

“Tell me, this power you’ve obtained through defying destiny, what do you use it for?”

“For others.” Jinta replied immediately, needing no time to think. “I fight to protect others, and nothing else.” He fought not just for Byakuya but for Suzune and the other villagers of Kadono. He might have had no other skills to live by, but that didn’t dull the sincerity with which he wielded his blade.

“You willingly take on excess burden and let it crush you? Interesting. A very human answer.” The demon laughed heartily.

Jinta still heard no disdain or mockery in the demon’s voice, simply a genuine, pure-hearted interest. Intrigued, he found himself developing a corresponding interest in a demon as peculiar and rational as this one. He said, “Let me ask you a question as well, then. Demon, for what purpose do you harm humans?”

“Hm... I do not readily have such answers on hand like you humans. But if I had to say...it is because I am a demon.”

“So, it is in your nature to kill humans?”

“No. Our nature is to achieve our purpose. We live by emotion alone, seeking a purpose worthy of seeing through...then we die to achieve it. Such is a demon.” The demon’s voice grew uncertain. It took on a tone of self-derision as he sneered at himself. His earlier boldness was gone, and a look of utter resignation at his own powerlessness took hold, unbecoming on such a muscular figure. **“I’ve found my purpose worth fulfilling in this land. And so, I will act to achieve it and do nothing else. A demon cannot escape their**

nature. It is the only way of life they are allowed.”

A demon’s nature wasn’t to kill humans but to achieve their goals by any means necessary, even at the cost of other life? If the demon’s words were to be trusted, then what separated man from demon?

Jinta hesitated for a brief moment. Confusion raked at his mind, but he didn’t loosen his stance. He asked, “You can’t stop yourself?”

“I wouldn’t be a demon if I could.”

This, Jinta understood. He understood because he was exactly the same. This demon, this...man could not change what he lived for, just as Jinta himself could not. It was difficult for either of them to divert from the path they chose—and their paths now clashed.

“...I see. Then I won’t hold back.”

“Good.”

The cold, heavy air of the cave tensed. Without logic or reason, they understood: The coming exchange of blows would be the last.

“Before we begin...” The muscles on the demon’s remaining arm began to swell. Jinta wondered if he was gathering the last of his strength to this limb. Then it suddenly began to bubble and pulse, quickly expanding. It stopped once the arm was twice its original size. Only that appendage was affected, leaving his body greatly asymmetrical.

“Interesting parlor trick,” Jinta taunted. The pressure he felt emanating from the demon now was far greater than from any demon he’d fought before. His mind screamed that the mutated arm was dangerous, but he chose to hide his unease with a provocation.

“A parlor trick? Yes, I suppose so.” The demon roared with laughter, seeming to genuinely enjoy the comment. He then brandished his right arm to show it off, grinning triumphantly. **“We demons awaken to a unique ability after a century of life—though I’ve heard of some awakening their power in mere decades or even at birth. Regardless, you’ll find all superior demons like me have such a unique ability.”**

“And this is yours, I take it?”

“Not exactly. My power is *Assimilation*, which lets me absorb other living beings into myself. A useless skill in a fight...or at least it would be if not for one thing: By using *Assimilation* on another demon, I can take their power for my own. There is yet one more use for *Assimilation*, but it remains irrelevant for now.”

The demon crudely swung his arm, and a roaring gust of wind erupted. If that was from a mere casual swing, the result of a connecting blow wasn't hard to imagine. A cold sweat ran down Jinta's brow. It was clear the demon didn't call himself a superior demon for nothing. Win or lose, Jinta likely wasn't getting out of this unscathed. “What power is that, then?”

“*Superhuman Strength*, I believe it was called. It allows me to increase my strength through changing everything down to my bone structure for a brief time. A simple but effective power. Not that I've devoured any others.”

Jinta was facing a formidable enemy like no other, but that was precisely why the demon's actions confused him so. The demon was talkative, sure, but why go so far as to reveal his own hand? Was this all a trick? But he'd also said that demons didn't lie. This demon certainly didn't seem the type to stoop so low as to use words to deceive. He said to the demon, “You seem eager to share your secrets.”

“I told you, didn't I? To be a demon is to die to complete your purpose. This is all necessary... No, let's call it a parting gift.”

Jinta was baffled. Necessary? A parting gift? Perhaps he meant that this was a final “present” for the soon-to-be departed Jinta. It all remained unknowable.

Jinta furrowed his brow, demanding an explanation, but the demon just airily laughed. **“Don't worry about it. There's no point.”**

“...I suppose so. What must be done remains the same either way.”

No matter the demon's purpose, their deathmatch awaited. The tense atmosphere made that clear enough. There was no point in thinking about anything but ending the life that stood before him.

Jinta's mind, clouded with speculation, went clear. Exuding bloodlust as pure

as clear water, he steadied his sword and expanded his senses to encompass his breathing.

One, exhale—he took half a step forward.

Two, inhale—then tensed his whole body.

Three, hold—*it begins*.

The demon burst forth with a deafening, explosive boom. His attack was as simple as before, crude and without technique, a mere lunge of the fist forward. It was still powerful enough to make the wind roar and was far faster than before—fast enough to leave Jinta no time to dodge.

At a glance, Jinta understood he couldn't stop the blow. So, he thought, could he evade backwards? No, that would be meaningless. Sidestep it? No, it was too late for that. Could he block with his sword? No, it wouldn't withstand the impact. He could envision no future in which he avoided this attack.

There was only one thing he could do. His only purpose was to kill, after all, and that was only possible by advancing forward.

He steeled himself in but a single moment, then stepped forward. He lowered his center of gravity and thrust his left shoulder out, using it to swat the demon's hand away from the side.

"Ngh, *gah!*" It took only an instant, a brief instant, for his defenseless left arm to be smashed, torn, and then tossed, spinning, through the air. Blood sprayed from the wound and pain coursed through him, pulling his face into a grimace. But he remained calm. He had expected this level of injury. There was no time to wallow in pain. The only things that mattered were the fact that he'd diverted the trajectory of the demon's fist a fraction and that he was alive.

The demon didn't stop. Jinta had survived the attack with some sacrifice, but he hadn't halted the demon's momentum. He *had*, however, diverted the demon's fist, creating the slightest of openings. He moved into the freed-up space, his torn shoulder grazing against the demon's arm.

Jinta's wound was deep, but it didn't matter. Sacrificing his arm would allow him to live if he played this right. He raised his sword, readying a one-handed overhead strike. Using every muscle in his body, he swung downwards.

The demon sensed approaching death and hurriedly bent backwards, pulling his enlarged right arm back to protect himself. Jinta poured his entire being into the swing, to land the deathblow before the arm returned.

But he was too late.

His sword swing was incredibly fast, but the demon was simply faster. Jinta's beloved sword, which had served him for so many years, snapped against the demon's grotesque arm, scattering into the air as shards. He was without a weapon and at the cruel mercy of the demon's next attack.

The demon smirked, but Jinta hadn't given up hope yet. He let go of his broken sword and reached into the air, grabbing his sword's broken blade tip faster than it could fall. He latched onto it like a knife, cutting into his palm. Blood flowed. His hand would only afford him one strike.

This was Jinta's last chance. He twisted his body to its limit, stepping forward as he thrust his right arm. The demon could see it all but didn't, *couldn't* move. His arm was spent from his last block, leaving him stiff.

Jinta pushed strength all the way into his fingers, supplementing his loose grip by ignoring the pain and digging the blade into his own flesh and bone. He aimed for the demon's heart, to finish it all with this attack.

"Aargh...gaaah!"

Jinta felt the blade dig through the bones of his hand. It had punctured the left side of the demon's chest, and fresh blood sprayed across Jinta's whole body. The heart was pierced.

After a brief moment, the demon's colossal body lost all strength and slumped backwards.

Their long battle met its end here.

A white vapor rose from the demon's body, proof that he was dying. The moment a demon breathed their last, so too would the last of their flesh fade. He was beyond saving now...

Jinta paused and wondered: Why had the thought of saving the demon come

to him before the elation of victory? Was he reluctant to see this demon go?

“Ngh...” His own wounds were severe. Blood still flowed from the place where his left arm had been. He tried to apply pressure with his remaining hand but to little effect. At this rate, he would die of blood loss if he didn’t find something with which to tend to himself.

“You’re soaked in blood.” The demon, facing the ceiling, turned its neck to look at Jinta. A white vapor rose from him, and his voice was raspy, like air leaking from lungs. Death was close, and his breathing was labored. Despite all that, the demon looked calm.

“I’m better off than you,” Jinta scoffed, shoulders heaving as he breathed. He was only playing tough; truthfully, he was dipping in and out of consciousness from the pain. If he didn’t focus, he’d pass out completely.

“Ha, you got me there.”

“You seem pretty calm for someone who’s dying.”

“I’ve achieved my purpose. Death means nothing now.” The demon looked satisfied, at peace. Here he was on his deathbed, quietly waiting for the end, looking like he’d lived a life without regrets. It wasn’t the look of a man who’d lost. Jinta was about to question this again when the demon grinned cynically and, with utter calm, said, **“The demon I was with, her power is called *Farsight*. She can use it to see distant places.”**

Jinta had no idea what the demon was prattling on about but listened anyway. These were the demon’s last words, and he didn’t seem the type to talk nonsense. They may have fought to the death just moments prior, but Jinta still had respect for the demon.

“She can also use her power to see the shapeless future ahead. My companion saw two things this time with her power: One was the advent of the Demon God, our lord, in Kadono’s distant future.”

The Demon God? Jinta wondered. It sounded absurd, but, again, would this demon lie? If this was the truth, Jinta couldn’t ignore it. If a single superior demon had left him in such a state, what could he possibly do against this Demon God, however strong they must be?

“The other thing she saw was that the one who will become the Demon God, more than a hundred years hence, lives in Kadono today. That is why we’ve come.”

Jinta did not know who this person who’d become the Demon God was—the future should only be known to the gods, after all—but he did know of a demon who lived in Kadono. He recalled the words of the female demon: ***“Perhaps he’s on his way to becoming a spirit after spending so much time with one of ours. Y’know, what’s-her-name... Suzune-chan?”*** He hadn’t realized it then, but something had been off. How did she know about Suzune?

“No...” he murmured. They had all believed the demons were after either Byakuya or the sacred sword Yarai, but what if that assumption was wrong? What if they were after—

“Human, a parting gift,” the demon interrupted Jinta’s thoughts. **“Take it with you.”**

Jinta saw something move out of the corner of his eye. He reflexively moved to dodge but was a moment too late. “Ngh!”

The lopped off left arm of the demon had flung itself at him as though it were alive and grabbed Jinta by the neck. Jinta grabbed the arm by its wrist and pulled as hard as he could, but his human strength couldn’t make it budge.

He’d been careless. Even after piercing the demon’s heart, he should’ve stayed vigilant until the demon faded completely. Now he was paying the price with his life. Air couldn’t reach his lungs, and his left shoulder was still bleeding freely. This spelled the end for him. His vision fogged as though he were in a sandstorm, and his forehead prickled with flares of pain. His throat was on fire, and the demon’s choking grip felt as though it were melting his flesh.

“You claimed to fight to protect others,” said somebody, somewhere. **“Be that the case, I ask you this: What will you do when that which you vowed to protect is no longer worthy of protection? What will you cut down then?”**

Jinta, his consciousness already fading, couldn’t make heads or tails of the words.

“Human, for what purpose do you wield your blade?” For some reason, only

those words stayed with him.

Shirayuki... Suzune...

Like hot iron, the world around him melted away.

Kadono was on high alert, wary of the potential demon attack. No demon would be laying a hand on their Itsukihime. A shrine maiden guardian was by her side, and the shrine itself was guarded by men equipped with weapons. The women and children confined themselves to the safety of their homes. Even Suzune stayed home and patiently awaited her brother's return—not that she went outside much in the first place.

“Jinta...” Suzune murmured her brother's name. The one dearest to her was risking his life for Byakuya's sake, and that fact tore at her. To be blunt, she didn't give a damn about anyone other than Jinta. Even the well-being of their childhood friend, now shrine maiden, didn't matter to her at all. She called Byakuya “Princess” simply because Jinta respected Byakuya, not out of any respect of her own.

Her wish for the two to be together was for the sake of Jinta's happiness. As long as he was with Byakuya, no other woman would dare approach him, which was ideal for Suzune. Her feelings for her brother ran that deep. She loved her brother dearly as family—and perhaps as something more.

On that distant rainy night when her father abandoned her, Jinta reached out a hand. In that moment, that hand saved her. From then on, he was her *everything*. That was why she hated it when he left for demon-hunting duties, not just because she was worried for him or because they'd be apart for a while. She loathed the fact that he was fighting for somebody who wasn't her.

I guess Jinta's really going to marry Princess, she thought to herself, then fell glum. She hadn't heard the truth of Itsukihime's marriage yet. In her mind, Jinta and Byakuya were still meant for one another.

Her heart ached. She didn't want to see him swear vows to someone else. She wanted her savior to be with her forever and ever. Whether she felt those feelings as his younger sister or as a woman, she herself did not know.

Occasionally, however, she would wonder: If she hadn't been his younger sister, could there have been a future in which they married?

She considered it again but dismissed the thought almost immediately, shaking her head to drive it away. It was a foolish idea. She was allowed by his side precisely because she was his younger sister. It was the only reason he'd reached his hand out to her that night. She was fine with what she had. Even if they couldn't be together as man and woman, there was happiness enough in being together as brother and sister.

Perhaps that was why she'd stayed in the form of a child. Their blood bond would remain forever, but if she grew, she'd eventually have to wed and start a new family. She didn't even want to imagine a life like that, by somebody else's side. But she didn't want to become an unmarried old woman and burden Jinta either. So, she stayed young. Unable to defy her own emotions, her body stopped growing of its own accord. It must have been the demon blood in her that made it possible. Her feelings were strong enough to defy her own nature.

I don't want them to marry... she thought. But even if she remained young, her brother would still marry Byakuya someday. He would never abandon her, she knew that. No matter what happened, Jinta would always be there for her. But things would never again be like they were now.

As much as it pained her, she knew she was helpless against the future. So, despite wanting to be the one by his side, she was willing to settle for his happiness alone. Suzune didn't care about anyone other than Jinta. In her darkest hour, on that rainy night, Jinta reached a hand out to her. His selfless gesture had saved her back then, so it was only right that she be selfless in return.

In low spirits, Suzune let herself topple over onto the tatami mat. She laid like that for some time until she heard a sliding door open.

"Jinta!" She rushed to the entrance, full of glee.

However, waiting for her there, casual as could be, was a demon.

"Why hello there, my dear."

“I WAS EXPECTING YOU to be older, like I saw in my vision, but I guess that’s still to come.” A demon stood at the entrance, oblivious to her own unnatural presence. She stared at Suzune, sizing her up. **“But don’t worry, my *Farsight*’s never wrong. You’ll grow into a beautiful woman, Suzune-chan, far more beautiful than that princess girl, really.”**

“...Who are you, old lady?” Suzune slowly backed away, wary of the overly friendly demon. She wondered how and *why* the demon knew both her name and Byakuya’s appearance.

“Wha—old lady? Well, I guess I *am* an old lady from your perspective, since I’ve been around for more than a century. But hey, at least I’m still younger than *him*,” she laughed. Although she was an inhuman spirit, she seemed oddly devoid of malice. She showed no intent to harm her and spoke in a light tone. Because of that, Suzune lowered her guard, and the idea of running away didn’t even cross her mind. The demon continued, **“So, do you know what I am?”**

“...A demon.”

“Right, just like you. We’re on the same team then, yeah?”

“No, I’m...human,” Suzune stated firmly, not fully believing her own words herself. It was because she was a demon that her father had abused her, and it was because she was a demon that she couldn’t stay with her friend. She had long ago accepted that she wasn’t a human. But she wanted to believe she was. For the sake of the brother who would stay by such a demon’s side, who would protect her, she wanted to believe she could be a human.

“I see... Your brother must be a really nice person,” the demon said with a warm sigh.

Suzune had fully expected the demon to ridicule her—she herself thought her own words foolish, after all. The demon’s kind reply took her by surprise.

“Huh?”

“You want to be a human for your brother’s sake, right? He must be quite

the guy then.”

“He is!” Suzune replied without hesitation. The demon’s appearance was suspicious, and she was clearly plotting something—moreover, demons were nothing but an enemy as far as the village was concerned—but Suzune couldn’t help smiling when she heard her brother praised, no matter who that praise came from.

“You really love that brother of yours, huh?”

“...I do. Jinta’s my everything.” Those words came from her heart, but they were clearly not the words of a child. Jinta would always, always be there to offer her his hand. He was, without exaggeration, her everything.

“A girl’s a girl, no matter how small, eh?” the demon muttered under her breath, hanging her head with a somber look. She quickly bounced back, however, covering her dark mood with a forced smile and continuing on in her lighthearted tone. **“But, ya know, there’s someone out there who’s going to hurt that brother of yours. I was hoping maybe we could stop this person together.”**

“...Together?”

“Yeah. Just come along with me for a bit. Don’t worry, we demons don’t lie. I won’t bring any harm to you.” The demon extended a hand to Suzune. Though it was the hand of a demon, it was also the hand of a woman, and her fingers were small and dainty. But the gesture only made Suzune wary once again.

“...No.”

“Why not?”

“You might not hurt me, but you didn’t say you wouldn’t hurt Jinta.” Though she felt no malice from the demon, Suzune wasn’t so foolish as to simply go along with her.

The demon had expected this level of resistance, however, and had thought of a plan to convince the girl beforehand. **“I see... Then how about this?”** With a grin, she touched the pointer finger of her other hand to Suzune’s forehead.

It happened faster than Suzune could react. She felt a warmth from the demon's finger, and then something else flowed in with it. It took shape in her mind, burning an image into her vision. What she saw shocked her so much that she couldn't even scream.

Byakuya was undressing herself before a man—someone other than Suzune's brother.

With a jolt, Suzune moved away from the demon, but the image she had seen was vividly clear: Byakuya performing an indecent act, giving herself to a man other than Jinta. She had a feeling she'd seen the man before somewhere. She trembled. She couldn't believe it. She didn't want to believe it. In shock, she asked, "What was that?"

"My ability, *Farsight*. I can use it to share things I've seen with others. Only just a bit, though."

"Not that! What was...*that*?"

"It'll really happen, if that's what you're wondering," the demon said with a mean-spirited smile.

"You're lying..."

"You don't believe me? Then why don't we go check together?" The demon's outstretched hand waited.

Suzune was confused. Was the demon lying? She knew Byakuya, no, *Shirayuki* would never do such a thing. She *wouldn't*, right?

A small doubt took hold. Worry and anxiety ate away at her, precisely because it involved her dear brother.

Really, what choice did she have?

"Come with me. For your brother."

Jinta was her everything.

"For my brother..." she parroted, greatly hesitating. The demon waited patiently, never withdrawing her outstretched hand. Eventually, Suzune took it, a hand other than her brother's, for the first time.

The demon felt a slight pang of regret as Suzune slowly took her hand. ***If only man and demon could coexist like you and Jinya, then maybe we wouldn't have to do such cruel things.***

Beyond the bamboo screen of the shrine, Byakuya stood alone, petrified with worry. The curtain of night had already descended. The only light in the back of the shrine came from a paper lantern.

Some time had passed since the sunset, but Jinta still hadn't returned to the village.

"Jinta..." she faintly murmured. She knew his strength but still feared the worst. What if he'd lost? What if he was hurt and needed help? Such worries ran through her mind, but without any way to ease them, she could only stand in a daze and let her eyes drift.

By chance, her gaze wandered to Yarai, the sacred sword. Without thinking, she reached for it, then slowly unsheathed it. With its thick blade, it was heavier than a normal sword. The lantern's light reflected gray off its side. She had reached for Yarai impulsively, but holding it calmed her, something about the sword's rough gleam working to ease her heart.

It was said that an old swordsmith had crafted Yarai for his wife, and that these two were the parents of Kayo, the first Itsukihime. The story went that the swordsmith was the best in Kadono, that he wanted to make the greatest sword ever forged as a gift for his wife. Unfortunately, his wife left this world before he could finish it, so the sword was enshrined instead and then protected by his daughter Kayo and her descendants until it had passed into Byakuya's hands. That made Yarai a gift for a loved one that remained forever ungiven. Whether the tale behind the sword was true or not was debatable, but the thought that heartbreak existed even in other times brought Byakuya some slight comfort.

What am I even thinking? Byakuya smiled disparagingly at herself. Despite all the bravery she had shown Jinta, she still dared to hold some lingering attachment. She returned the sword to its place, forced her stirring heart to

calm, and then sighed.

After a few moments of nothingness, she heard the bamboo screen roughly moved aside.

“Hey.” Standing there was a handsome man of slightly shorter stature than Jinta. He was the other shrine maiden guardian, the man who would become her husband.

“Kiyomasa? Do you need something?” She ignored the ache of her heart and acted normally. She succeeded, it seemed, as he didn’t seem to notice her mood.

“Nah, just bored, so I figured I’d have you keep me company. It’s not like there’s any point in me standing guard when the shrine’s surrounded by the village men.” Kiyomasa was one of her shrine maiden guardians, but he always spoke to her casually. Though there was room for his attitude towards Jinta to improve, she liked him overall.

“You never change. What is it today? A new book?” she asked, assuming he’d come into the shrine out of consideration for her. She hid her worry for Jinta with a smile.

Kiyomasa’s response, however, was something she never could have anticipated. He bit his lip and grimaced, then looked at her with lifeless eyes. “Not quite,” he said. He grabbed her roughly by the shoulders and pushed her against the wall.

She didn’t understand what was happening. Without waiting for her to respond, he drew closer, his heavy breaths audible. And then she understood.

“Wh-what do you think you’re doing?!” She struggled, but he had a firm grip on her wrists, which he pinned against the wall.

His lips curled into a lecherous grin as he said, “When your future husband asks you to ‘keep him company,’ there’s only one thing that could mean, right?” One of his rough hands stayed on her wrists, and the other ran up and down her body.

She didn’t particularly hate Kiyomasa, but right now the feeling of his touch revolted her. It occurred to her then that it wasn’t the touching that bothered

her, but the fact that she didn't love the man who was doing it. She wanted *the man she loved* to touch her. Coming from anyone else, it felt like her heart was being violated.

"Why...why *now* of all times?!" she asked. How could he do this when he knew she was worried for Jinta?

"Because now is the best time," he replied. "Jinta isn't going to lose to some demons, so there's no point worrying about him. He'll fulfill his duty, so I have to fulfill mine. And you have to fulfill yours."

A jolt shot through her body. Their duty. To bear a child. The whole point of their marriage was for her to birth a successor. Obviously, she knew that meant doing *this*...eventually.

"B-but..."

"C'mon, you knew we'd have to."

She had known. She had agreed to the marriage with the full knowledge of what it entailed. But to do it *now*? Was she not allowed to at least pray for Jinta's well-being? She had already betrayed him with her choice; she understood she had no right to love him anymore. But she did not want to be so debauched as to lay with another man while he risked his life.

"Please, stop... At least until I know Jinta's safe," she pleaded.

"I'm doing this for his sake, though," Kiyomasa sneered. "We'll have to make a child regardless. But you're Itsukihime. You'll always need somebody to guard you, even on our wedding night. You get what I'm saying, right?"

She felt a vice tighten around her heart. She would bear a child with Kiyomasa, as was the will of the village. Someone would have to guard her as they performed the act. And that someone—*In exchange, I'll continue to protect you as your shrine maiden guardian*—could only be Jinta.

"No..." She had the determination. She had the resolve. But she lacked the imagination. She had envisioned a future spent with someone else, but she hadn't considered the fact she'd have to sleep with another man while *he* stood before them.

Her face paled at the realization. She forgot entirely about her role as Itsukihime and momentarily returned to being Shirayuki.

Kiyomasa said, “Of course, if him overhearing your moans is what you’re into, I don’t mind waiting. Whatever floats your boat.”

She seethed, “Why you...!”

“I said it, didn’t I? Now is the best time. He’s away and we don’t need him to guard us. If we’re lucky, we can finish this in one night.” He spoke listlessly, defeated. His earlier look of lechery had disappeared before she knew it, replaced by one of utter anguish.

“Kiyo...masa?” she ventured.

“This way is better for you, ain’t it? ...Well, whatever. It’s your choice. Do whatever the hell you want.”

There was a great contradiction in this man. He’d cornered her while so clearly loathing his own actions. Byakuya wasn’t stupid. She knew Kiyomasa held some measure of affection for her—it was readily apparent from his thorny treatment of Jinta. There was a good chance that was why their marriage had been pushed forward so quickly as well. So why was Kiyomasa trying his hardest to prevent any real love from forming between them?

She couldn’t read his intent at all. She looked into his eyes, but the depths of his soul remained cloudy, obfuscated. But one fact remained: While his words stirred hate, they also held some truth. She would have to lie with Kiyomasa eventually, and Jinta would have to guard their bedroom when that time came—and there was no way she could bear that.

“...Let me go,” she said, her arms going slack.

“Right.” He did just that, unhanding her.

“I hate to admit it, but you’re right,” she began softly, her voice devoid of any emotion. “I chose this path for Kadono’s sake. I can’t run from it now. And today is an opportunity like no other.”

Yet, no matter how much she told herself that this was the path she chose, or that this was for Kadono’s sake, Jinta’s curt voice still echoed in her ears.

I'm sorry, Shirayuki. I shouldn't have been so obstinate. So aloof and detached, yet considerate of her.

...No. You got me beat. He always went along with her selfish whims, yet still bothered to check what she kept hidden behind the veil of her heart.

And from then on, I'll be the one to protect you. The day she swore to become Itsukihime and abandoned any hope of love, he swore a promise of his own, as though he thought her foolish little vow was beautiful.

I'll choose you as my shrine maiden guardian when I become Itsukihime, so I want you to choose me as your—

In the end, though, the youthful wish they shared went unfulfilled.

She laughed sadly. “Even now, I...still...” Even now, she still loved him. Even now, her trembling heart still thought of him, his awkwardness, his gentleness. The days she had spent with him were everything to Byakuya, to Shirayuki. But they could no longer return to those times. Her love remained, and her wish to be with him wouldn't fade, but she could not change her path. She couldn't allow herself to regret her choice.

And yet, she did feel regret.

“However,” she began. In the dreary silence of the shrine, the sound of rustling clothes was crisp and clear. The lower part of her red hakama fell to the floor with a soft thump. She reached to undo her white robe. She didn't bother folding the garments, simply letting her clothes pile loosely on the tatami mats. Piece by piece, she undressed, until only a thin white underrobe remained. Her dainty figure was faintly visible through it. “I remain Itsukihime.” She could not abandon her duty as shrine maiden. To do so would betray the reverence Jinta had shown her, the respect he had for her vow.

“Thank you, Kiyomasa. You were trying to help me, weren't you? I can't give you my heart, because it's with him, but my body is yours to do with as you please.” She had already given up what was dearest to her for Kadono's sake, so what was a little more? If anything, she felt grateful to Kiyomasa for creating such an opportunity.

She smiled softly. Not an ounce of doubt or regret remained in her heart.

“What...? What is wrong with you two...” Kiyomasa’s face twisted, not with lust, but in a fierce grimace, like a child fighting to hold back his tears. It was not the face of a man eager to swoop down upon a woman. “No, no, no. This... This isn’t what I wanted. I... I just...” He muttered something through his uncertain jumble of emotions, but his voice soon choked off and petered out.

Kiyomasa’s goals remained a mystery to Byakuya, but he looked pitiful in this moment, almost begging for her forgiveness. She was perplexed but extended a hand to him regardless.

“Oh, perfect timing.”

Byakuya froze. A shiver ran down her spine as she turned around to see a silhouette had now joined them in the dim shrine. They hadn’t even noticed her enter.

The intruder, a woman, stood in the corner and looked at the pair of them as though scandalized. **“Jeez. Poor boy’s out there fighting with his life on the line while the woman he loves sleeps with another man? That just ain’t right.”**

Kiyomasa quickly wiped his tears and snapped to attention. He grabbed Yaraï and stepped forward to protect Byakuya.

“Who are you?” Byakuya fixed her robes as well as she could, then glared at the woman, trying to act stoic.

The woman cackled with contempt. Her words were just as biting. **“Why bother putting on airs after being caught acting like a whore? And isn’t it pretty obvious who, or should I say *what* I am, ‘Princess’?”** She stood holding a three-pronged spear and wore an indigo kimono patterned with hexagonal snowflakes. Her skin was pale white, and her eyes were red like rusted iron.

“A demon... So, their target was Byakuya after all,” Kiyomasa said. It was the obvious conclusion. While one demon kept Jinta busy, another came and attacked Itsukihime. Their fears had been warranted...or so it seemed.

The demon shot him down. **“That’s not quite right. Your princess will die here, yes, but she’s just an afterthought.”** Her words were callous, and her smile remained, but her red eyes held nothing but contempt. **“But really, it’s a good thing we got here before you two started doing the full business. Even**

I'd be hesitant to show all that to a child."

"A child...?" Byakuya frowned slightly. What was she talking about? Who was this child? Byakuya was about to ask when a small child stepped out from the demon's shadow.

The child looked to be about six or seven years of age, with a bandage over her right eye, and her hair streaked reddish-brown. She was someone Byakuya knew well.

"...Suzu-chan?" Byakuya said. The sudden appearance of Suzune left her stunned, feeling like she'd been struck in the head. Her mind raced. Why was Suzune here, with a demon? Did the demon bring her here for something? Suzune had demon blood in her, but... No... That couldn't be, right?

Byakuya was dying to ask so many questions, but Suzune beat her to the punch with one of her own.

"Why, Princess?" Her one visible eye was filled with more contempt than a face so cherubic should hold. "Jinta's fighting with his life on the line. For Kadono, for me...but most of all, for you. So *why*?" Her gaze was icy, full of disgust.

Byakuya felt compelled to say something, anything. She tried to maintain a normal tone as best she could and said, "This is my duty. As Itsukihime, I am to marry Kiyomasa." It was a pathetic excuse. What was the point of saying such nonsense now? The truth held no meaning.

Suzune's eye shot wide open as she looked to Kiyomasa. A worrying gleam glinted as she looked back at Byakuya. Her gaze held something beyond disgust—a loathing, a hatred. "What...? Is it really that important for you to sleep with another man while Jinta's fighting for his life?"

"I..." Byakuya began to speak but was quickly silenced. The pressure emanating from the young girl overpowered everyone present.

"I thought you loved Jinta. But really, you were fine with any man."

"No!" Byakuya protested, her voice trembling. That alone she wouldn't concede. She had betrayed his feelings, yes, but her love was real.

“Then, *why*?!” Suzune raised her voice too, unable to control her emotions. A scathing fury rose in her tone, as well as a certain implacable frailty. Her eye remained clouded with hate, but her breathing ran frantic, as though she were on the verge of tears. “What was it all for, then?” She began to let the pure, unadulterated truth spill from her lips. “For his happiness, I was willing to endure anything. I was ready to give you two my blessing, no matter how much it hurt.” No logic or cohesion could be found in her words. It was simply a flood of emotions let loose. “I could bear someone else taking his hand if he could just be happy...so why?” Her shoulders trembled and she bit her lip, her feelings now laid bare.

“Suzu-chan...” At that moment, Byakuya realized what had evaded her for so long. Suzune looked at Jinta the same way she herself did—as a woman. It had probably been this way since the beginning. Suzune showed the love a younger sister had for her brother but hid the love she had as a girl underneath a veil of innocence. Byakuya felt nothing but guilt for not realizing sooner.

“Suzune... You stayed so young, all this time, for his sake?” She knew Suzune had demon blood. She had assumed that was why she never grew, but that wasn’t the full story. She chose to stay childlike, to stay the same as she had been in their shared past. Her mind must have aged normally, of course, but she willed herself to play the ever-youthful sister—*resigned* herself to staying his little sister.

It was so clear now. She genuinely loved Jinta and chose to not act on that love because of it. She locked away her feelings, settled for the role of a younger sister who wished for a future where Jinta could be happily wed to Byakuya—as the boy himself wished. She had to have felt jealousy, but she set that aside for the sake of his happiness. All this time.

Suzune cried, “For you, I was willing to let him go...” But her sacrifice had been for nothing. Her one wish, the future happiness of the one she loved, had been tossed aside by the woman who now stood before her. There was no going back.

“I’m sorry, I really am. But no matter what anyone may say, I cannot change the path I’ve chosen,” Byakuya said. She would protect Kadono, the land her mother had protected before her, the land that had accepted Jinta with open

arms. The cost was great. She had betrayed the one she loved, and now she'd trampled all over her childhood friend's heart, but she would soldier on anyway. To change course would be to sully the beauty Jinta saw in her own determination. "I am Itsukihime," she said, "and no other."

It was a difficult thing to change the path to which one had committed. Even if everything went to pieces, she would cling to that beauty Jinta saw in her, the last piece she had of him, to the bitter end. That was the only way she could remain the woman he fell in love with, the only way she could honor his love for her.

With an unwavering will, she said, "As the Woman of Fire, I will continue to live for Kadono. That is the only way that I can return Jinta's feelings."

But her words fell on deaf ears.

"Huh?" Suzune's face darkened the moment the words "for Kadono" left Byakuya's lips. "You took all I ever wanted and threw it away for these nobodies?" Her trembling stopped all at once. Not for Jinta, but *for Kadono*. The very words infuriated her.

She tore away the bandage covering her red right eye and glared. A bitter laugh spat out of Suzune.

"Was taking him from me not enough?" Not only had Byakuya thrown away the thing Suzune couldn't have in an act of pure arrogance, but it was made all the worse by how Byakuya had directly hurt her dear brother.

Byakuya began to say, "All I—"

"Enough. Not another word out of your filthy mouth." Suzune's childish tone was gone. Only a dark, dark hatred emanated from her now, a hatred that spoke of the desire to kill—no, *worse*. It was a hatred that wanted to eviscerate Byakuya, to gouge out her eyes, empty her skull, crush her body, leave not even a trace of her soul behind. Suzune's red eye conveyed that hatred clearly.

"What'd I tell you? The princess is a bad, bad girl, one who will make your brother very sad." The demon finally spoke again, whispering in Suzune's ear. No matter the age, spirits like her wormed their way into the cracks in people's hearts.

“Don’t listen to her, Suzune-chan!” Kiyomasa exclaimed.

“Oh, is the playboy trying to say something?”

“You, be quiet!”

No matter how much Kiyomasa pleaded, his voice could not reach Suzune. She barely even turned to look at him, as though the very sight of him revolted her.

“What will it be, Suzune-chan?” the demon whispered again, her sweet voice coaxing young Suzune’s mind. **“Your dear brother loved her, yet the whore tried to sleep with another man. She betrayed him, hurt him. Clueless, he protects her while she laughs from the shadows.”**

Though encouraged by the demon, the hatred Suzune bore was her own. That much was clear from the look in her eyes.

“But you know, I have a feeling your brother will protect her even after learning the truth. Won’t he, Suzune-chan? You know him better than I do,” the demon said. **“Let’s think, shall we? What can you do for your brother?”**

“For Jinta...?”

“Yes. This awful girl hurt your brother. What’s the best thing you could do for him?” The demon whispered the coup de grâce. **“Don’t you think it’d be better if she didn’t exist?”**

Suzune didn’t even hesitate. Mired in hatred, she was led to the answer and took to it immediately. Before anyone knew it, the little girl was no longer a little girl.

“Huh...?” It was impossible to tell who exclaimed in surprise. Suzune’s transformation was so sudden, both Byakuya and Kiyomasa were left stunned. In the blink of an eye, a black miasma had enveloped Suzune, and an unknown young woman took her place.

The young woman stood limp, looking downwards. Her once reddish-brown-streaked hair was now a flowing, dazzling gold that fell all the way to her heels. She looked about sixteen, perhaps seventeen years of age. Her height was around five shaku, an average height for a woman. Her body was shapely, and

she wore a black robe woven out of the very miasma that had enveloped her just a moment ago. Languidly, she raised her face and opened her eyes to reveal bloody crimson irises. Her thin eyebrows and piercing gaze gave her a cold visage and a beauty that hid a dangerous edge.

“Suzu-chan...? Is that you?” Byakuya asked, to no reply. She knew it was Suzune, though. Her hair was different, but her face bore an unmistakable resemblance to her former self. Perhaps this was how she would have looked if she’d grown normally.

“Hey, Princess?” Suzune’s voice was as soft as bells, true to the meaning of her name. It was soothing, like a cool wind blowing through the room, and it captivated Byakuya for a moment. Suzune had the same childish tone, the same innocence, the same lightness. “...Would ya mind dying?”

Her crimson eyes glistened like gems. Both her eyes were red now.

“Byaku—” Kiyomasa moved to stand before Byakuya, but the other demon blocked his path.

“Not so fast, lady-killer. Men shouldn’t barge in on a scuffle between women.”

With an irritated click of his tongue, Kiyomasa stopped and readied Yarai. With his thumb, he popped the blade from its scabbard and moved to draw, but...

“Huh...?”

The blade wouldn’t budge. In a panic, he repeatedly tried to draw the blade, the sound of the guard clacking against the mouth of the scabbard looping over and over.

The demon didn’t let the fatal opening slip. She spun on her left leg and kicked at Kiyomasa’s flank.

“Gah...!” Kiyomasa flew through the air, landing against the hardwood floor far back in the private section of the shrine. He stood back up, grimacing in pain.

“You got some guts, but I’m afraid you’re kinda out of your depth here.”

Some things couldn't be conquered through willpower alone. The demon approached Kiyomasa, grabbed his right arm, and twisted it in an impossible direction.

"Ahh—agh?!" Something snapped audibly—his arm, or perhaps his spirit. He collapsed to his knees from the pain, then flopped onto the floor. Without hesitation, the demon thrust her foot into his stomach and sent him sliding across the floor. This time, he didn't get back up.

Ignoring the now-beaten Kiyomasa, the demon reached down and picked Yaraï up off the floor. She looked at it with interest, aware it was one of Kadono's treasures, and tried to draw it. The sword wouldn't budge for her either, however, and merely clacked as the guard and mouth bumped against each other.

"Weird. I can't draw it. Is this one of those things where only the chosen can do it or something?" she mused incomprehensibly to herself. She quickly gave up, bored, and tossed the sword to Suzune. **"Here."**

Suzune caught the sword in a sure grip, her expression unchanging. Her cold eyes questioned the demon.

"Might as well use it. If what I've *seen* is correct, you should be able to draw the blade. I'm sure Princess here will be thrilled to be killed by the very item she revered." She picked up Kiyomasa and said, **"All right then, I'll leave you two to it and go toss this boy somewhere."** With Kiyomasa slung over her shoulder, she left.

The stage was set. Suzune and Byakuya were alone in the shrine.

Suzune looked at the scabbard holding Yaraï and murmured, "How fun..." She traced a finger across the unembellished tachi sword's grip, then drew it with ease. The naked blade shimmered. For a moment, Suzune's body swayed, as though she was dizzy. Her lips turned up in a hateful, yet joyful smile. Her malice could be felt even more clearly now that she had a weapon in hand. She took one step forward, followed by another, slowly getting closer. Byakuya felt the noose tighten around her neck with each step Suzune took.

"Suzu-chan..." Byakuya was afraid. She had known Suzune since childhood. They'd lived under the same roof. And now Suzune was trying to kill her. The

fear she felt wasn't from her approaching death—she had been prepared to give her life from the day she resolved to become Itsukihime.

No, what made her heart quake was that it was *Suzune* who would kill her.

Jinta, Shirayuki, and Suzune. The three had always been together, a true family, or so Byakuya had believed. Yet Suzune showed genuine bloodlust towards her now. That was what terrified Byakuya—the thought that all those beautiful memories were so worthless to Suzune.

“Well then, Princess...” Suzune stopped and stared at Byakuya, her eyes ripe with contempt. She brought the tip of the sword to Byakuya's throat and smiled a very demonic smile indeed. “This is goodbye.”

HIS CONSCIOUSNESS was murky, as though something were mixing into and clouding his mind. He felt his identity slip away and something else melt into its place, hurrying and spurring him towards some destination. There was heat. There was cold. The bits of what could be called order broke apart. His scattered self lost any semblance of shape.

“Human, for what purpose do you wield your blade?” a voice whispered faintly.

The answer came easily. *What else could it be for, but to protect? This blade has always been wielded to protect others.*

His answer was genuine, yet he felt the pity that arose in the other presence.

Why do you look upon me with such pity?

“Forgive me. We have no choice but to use you two siblings for the sake of our long-cherished desire.”

Wait. Don’t go. What does that mean?

“This parting gift is the least I can do for you. I’m sure a time will come when you need it.”

What are you saying? He wanted to question the voice but lacked a body. No response came, no hand appeared. He simply floated between worlds.

In the end, the voice said nothing more and faded into the black light. What it wanted to convey remained a mystery, but its consciousness, its existence, were undoubtedly now gone from within him.

Finally, his consciousness melted into the white darkness.

“Nn...gh...” Jinta awoke on cold ground. He felt he had seen a strange dream, but all traces of it faded as his hazy mind cleared. He thought nothing of it, though—a dream was just a dream, after all—and lifted his dull, heavy body off the earth. With significant effort, he got to his feet.

Where am I? He looked around at the lightless cave. The torches the demon had prepared were burnt out, leaving his surroundings pitch-black. The rotten egg stench, however, had remained, which told him that he was still in the same cave.

...I'm alive. Somehow.

His eyes gradually adjusted, and he looked around the cave again, confirming that the demon's corpse was gone. The hand that had grabbed his neck was gone as well. It appeared the demon had died faster than he could suffocate. A stroke of luck.

As he basked in the peace of his survival, the demon's last words surfaced from the depths of his mind: Their target had been Suzune, not Byakuya. With a start, he exclaimed, "Suzune!"

Suzune, his only family, the one who had comforted him when he was powerless by saying she was happy enough just being by his side—she was in danger. He had to protect his dear sister. She was one of the reasons he wielded his blade, after all.

He was unwounded and felt no pain. He could fight another demon in this condition. He had no sword, but there was no time to worry about that. He had to get to Kadono as fast as possible.

Fearing the worst, he made haste. The lightless cave made it difficult for him to see what was ahead. He never thought to question why his body was uninjured and whole.

Jinta ran through the thick forest, his feet digging into the damp soil of the animal trail leading back to Kadono. Sunset was long past. Stars twinkled through the cracks in the canopy. He had been unconscious for a while. Bitter at his own carelessness, he bit his lip.

Would Suzune be safe? Tonight, the men of the village were stationed around the shrine to protect Byakuya, which meant everywhere else was left undefended. He couldn't shake a sense of foreboding.

Please be safe... He prayed as he ran without pause. His own speed surprised

him. He felt no shortness of breath, nor any fatigue. His body felt in better condition than it ever had before.

He wove through the trees and arrived at the village, then made a beeline to his house. His village, which should have been so familiar to him, had an unsettling look to it in the dimness.

Eventually, his straw-roofed house came into view.

“Suzune!”

Jinta threw open the sliding door and ran in without bothering to take off his straw sandals. But there was nobody inside.

Worry welled up inside him, and his mind raced. Where could she have gone? The house didn’t look like it’d been broken into, so maybe she hadn’t been kidnapped. Did she leave the house herself, then? But she hardly ever left, on account of her red eye and perpetual childhood. If she *were* to go anywhere though...

“The shrine.” It was the only place he could think of where she might be. He needed to check that Byakuya was safe anyway, so it made sense to check the shrine first. It wasn’t far from his home.

Hanging onto a sliver of hope, he made for the shrine. Worry hurried him forward, and he ran like mad. He reached the torii gate but froze at the sight of what lay beyond.

“What the hell...?”

He swallowed. The scent of blood hung thick and rank in the air, dizzying. Littered on the ground before the shrine were about a dozen corpses, flesh torn and strewn about, craniums split open.

Kadono was a small village. He knew all their faces.

“Oh, good for you, Jinta-sama. You found yourself quite the catch. We were getting worried since there was no talk of romance with you.”

“Goodness, to think you’ve grown this much. Why, I remember when you were just a little boy running around. Oh, how time flies.”

The two men who had teased him were there. Two kind souls who had

accepted him and Suzune into the village now lay dead in pools of their own blood and viscera.

“Jinta-sama...”

From amid the corpses, a single man remained on the verge of death. Jinta drew close and propped the man’s body up, but it was clear he didn’t have much time. His guts had been gouged out, his eyes crushed, and his blood loss was immense. He was barely hanging on.

“What happened?” Jinta asked.

“Aaah... S-Suzune...”

“Suzune?”

“With the demon...” That was all the man could manage before he perished.

Jinta rested the man’s corpse gently on the ground and gave him a silent prayer, albeit a short one. He picked up a dead man’s sword from the ground. He would need it to fight the demon. It felt wrong to take something from the dead, but he had no time to search for another weapon.

“Forgive me, I’ll be borrowing this. I’ll give you all a proper burial soon.” He quickly made for the shrine, only a short trot away now. He ran up to the wooden door and, without stopping, kicked it down to enter. “Shirayuki! Suzune!”

There was Byakuya, trembling before a female demon with golden hair that almost reached the floor. The demon held a sword out towards Byakuya and looked about to attack at any moment.

He didn’t recognize this demon, but he had no time to stop and think. The distance between him and Byakuya was just under three ken—not too far. He could make it.

Without stopping, he bolted forward.

“Jinta...” Byakuya murmured.

It’ll be okay now, he thought. Don’t you worry. I’ll take care of everything.

She stood up and approached with uneasy steps. She reached out a hand, and

he reached out in kind.

Had a mere three ken ever felt so excruciatingly long? For some reason, the demon hadn't yet moved, simply watching the scene in a daze. Her intent was a mystery to Jinta, but if she wouldn't move, then all the better.

The two were close. Just a little more. He sprinted so hard his body ached.

"Shirayuki!" He reached her. His left hand grabbed hers and pulled her in. A wind blew by the two as he embraced her dearly, as though to never let her go. He could smell her sweet scent—*krrishk*—along with the scent of rust.

He had made it. A sigh of relief escaped him. The worst of the worst had been avoided. He didn't know how strong this demon was, but he thought he should at least be able to buy enough time for Byakuya to escape. He was at a disadvantage, but it didn't matter. He had sworn, perhaps even foolishly so, to protect the beauty he saw in Byakuya on that day long ago. There was only one thing he could do: slay the golden-haired demon.

With a fierce conviction, he glared at the demon.

"Huh?"

She wasn't there. The space before him was empty, all traces of the spirit gone.

His mind got that far before realizing Byakuya hadn't so much as stirred in his arms. Fearing she was hurt, he loosened his embrace and checked on her condition.

"Ah...?"

He froze. He'd meant to check her complexion, but there was nothing to check. She remained unmoving in her arms, her face—her head—gone.

"Shira...yu...?"

She was gone from the neck up.

"Ah, ahh...?"

He couldn't process the reality. Hadn't he gotten to her in time? Shouldn't her smile have been waiting for him here? His vision went red, then redder.

Something prickled in the back of his mind.

He heard a thud behind him. He spun around and, with surprise, murmured, “Huh...?”

The golden-haired demon was a mere two sun behind him, less than a hand’s length away. She bore him no animosity. In fact, she looked at Jinta with concern in her eyes.

“You shouldn’t touch that,” she said. “It’s dirty.”

She held a familiar-looking sword in her right hand, backwards in a reverse grip: Yarai, the sacred sword passed down through generations of Itsukihime.

What are you doing there? Jinta thought, just as the sword blurred. It must have been swung. It moved faster than his eyes could follow. The only movement he saw was the moment it plunged into Byakuya’s chest. The extra weight of the sword caused her body to slip from his grasp.

She slid to the floor with a thud, the sword piercing her heart and pinning her to the ground.

He looked at her headless body. Her pale skin. Her thin, white underrobe that was taking on a hue of red. The sword thrust into her chest stuck up like a flower offered before a grave. He stared and stared, searching, but he couldn’t find her familiar smile anywhere.

The truth finally dawned on him. Byakuya was dead.

“That...can’t be.” His voice lacked its usual rigid tone. He spoke without any sophistication, as if he’d returned to childhood.

What’s wrong, Jinta?

But the warmth of his youth would never return. She would never speak to him again. She would never smile for him again. She would never tease him again.

Jeez, Jinta. You can’t do anything without your big sister.

She was gone from this world.

He was stunned and defenseless before the demon. He knew it was foolish,

but his body wouldn't move. The shock of Byakuya's death caused everything else to fade into the background.

"Welcome back. Are you unhurt?" The demon by his side smiled. Her lavish, golden hair stood out starkly against her ill-omened black robe. She had an uncanny, childlike affability to her, an innocence that contrasted with the beauty of her shapely face and figure. It was chilling.

She smiled. She dared to smile as Byakuya's head hung in her grip. The moment the dazed Jinta processed this, an anger welled up inside him from a place not even he recognized. His mind came to a boil, and his rage moved his limbs. Before he knew it, he was swinging his sword down on the demon's head.

"Whoa." In contrast to his rage, the demon remained blithe. She raised her right hand and sloppily brushed his sword to the side. It looked as though she put no strength into the action, yet his sword and his body were pulled into the motion so that he stumbled forward.

He quickly regained his footing and swung around. His sword hadn't broken, and his arm felt fine. That was only natural, of course—the demon had been gentle. She treated his sword with the same laxness an adult might treat a mischievous child's play-fighting.

"Hey, be careful. What's come over you all of a sudden?" She still seemed to bear him no animosity. He could feel no anger from her, nor any ill emotion for that matter.

He understood what that meant. To her, he didn't even amount to a fight. In the same way that people bore little malice towards the likes of flies or mosquitoes, he was too insignificant to be thought of as an opponent.

So, she hadn't disappeared earlier, not truly. She must have moved faster than he'd been able to perceive in order to rip off Byakuya's head. She had a power that no amount of training could achieve, a power that no martial arts could teach. The gap between the two of them was clear.

But, so what?

He took a fighting stance, holding his sword horizontally to his right. He

sharpened his mind to a point, glaring at his target. He knew that it was hopeless. He would not defeat this demon. He would attack, then become another corpse to throw on the pile. But, so what? Even if he couldn't win—*And from then on, I'll be the one to protect you*—he could at least die fighting.

Ready for death, he stepped forward and—

“What’s wrong, Jinta? Did something happen?”

His mind ground to a standstill. Even now, the golden-haired demon looked at him with concern. What was more, she knew his name, and she said it without an honorific. Few used his name without one. He looked at her face again, now seeing the shadow of someone he knew. There was a deep affection there, one he had been unable to make out before through the haze of his rage.

Hesitantly, he ventured, “Suzune...?”

“Yep!” She smiled with youthful jubilation. Adorably, as she always did.

Her smile pained him now. He couldn't even scrounge up the capacity to consider her sudden transformation. His mind could only manage to hold a single question: “You’re...really...Suzune?”

“Duh!” She puffed out her cheeks. Her childish mannerisms didn't match her adult looks, but he recognized them as Suzune's, and it broke his heart.

“Why...?” He wanted to ask, *If you're Suzune, why did you kill Byakuya?* The two were as close as sisters. How could one have killed the other? But all he could manage was, “You, why, how could you have...”

He couldn't make sense of her actions, of course. Just as he had feelings for Byakuya, Suzune was maddened by her feelings for him. He was her everything, and all else meant nothing to her. He was clueless to that reality and saw what she had done as mere insanity. He knew not of the hatred that the depths of her love had borne.

“Are you okay?” she asked. “I killed Princess, you know? Why aren't you happier?”

Similarly, Suzune could not understand her brother's feelings now. To her, Byakuya was a harlot who tried to hurt her dear brother. So, Suzune had killed

her. Now there was no one left who could hurt him—so he should be smiling. With the innocence of a child, she genuinely believed that.

Their incomprehension was mutual. Certainly, they loved each other as family, but there had been a fatal disconnect in exactly *how* they loved one another.

“I don’t... What are you saying?” he said.

“Oh, right. Princess said she was going to marry someone else. She was only pretending to like you! Isn’t that mean?”

No. That’s not it. She... We—

He tried to speak, but his mouth wouldn’t open. He and Suzune had run away from Edo together and lived supporting one another. They were always by each other’s side. Yet here was an uncrossable divide between them, one his voice could not bridge.

“She was even stripping, about to sleep with another man! Talk about awful. You should just forget about her. She’s not worth it.”

Hearing that made Jinta’s stomach feel like it would turn itself inside out. He’d known she would have to sleep with another man one day, of course, and even given his indirect approval. He could accept that. He treasured Shirayuki’s determination, the village of Kadono, and even Suzune, like no other—and he was willing to give anything to protect it all. So why had it come to this?

“Please...no more...” His voice was reduced to a shrill scrape. He couldn’t bear to hear any more, not from Suzune. He wanted her to remain the dear, dear sister he knew, even after everything, and he begged her to stop talking.

“Jinta...” she murmured, casting her gaze down sadly. The love they both held for their family only deepened their divide. Suzune mistook his plea as a sign of heartbreak, still in the grips of his love for Byakuya. So, she tried to fix the problem. “Do you still like Princess, Jinta? Are you sad she died, even though she was a bad person?”

She clapped her hands together, as though to say, *Eureka!* She even put on a happy smile. Her brother was hurting and she knew just what to say to ease his pain.

Their family's end approached.

"But hey! Now you don't have to see her marry someone else, right?"

The utter joy in her voice crushed Jinta. In that instant, he thought what he had been trying so hard to avoid thinking: Suzune had *taken* from him. He and Byakuya loved one another and had vowed to protect each other's way of life in their own, albeit clumsy, way. They couldn't become one in marriage, but they had committed to something greater. No matter how foolish it might have seemed to others, the two had been certain the choice they made was the right one.

Suzune kept on. "You liked her, so you didn't want to see her getting all friendly with another man, right? Well, she can't hurt you anymore now that she's dead! And really, you didn't need such a whore anyway."

Suzune had taken from Jinta everything he had ever felt pride in. She took their vows and destroyed them, and had the gall to act as though she was doing him a favor. She rendered down all he'd ever felt into base, ugly jealousy. Shirayuki's determination, her beautiful path, his belief in his own choice—Suzune trampled on it all.

And after all that, she said, "Hey, let's go home already. I'm tired."

Jinta's left arm throbbed. Everything he believed in was gone. His inner self had become a vortex of emotion, a singular emotion, pure and clear. And yet its depths lay too dark to perceive. Unmixed, murky, cold rage began to inflame his body. Weakly, he said, "You're...tired?"

"Yeah. I had to deal with a lot of annoying stuff today."

Annoying...? he thought. Did she mean Byakuya or the bodies outside? All of those people had been so kind. They'd accepted the two of them, strangers of dubious origin, even ignoring Suzune's obviously demonic nature. And she summed their deaths up as "annoying"?

"You'd betray the village that raised us, kill Byakuya, and...say it was annoying?" he asked. *You destroyed our second home.*

"Huh? What's wrong?"

And yet, you act so ignorant. How can you take from me everything I wanted to protect and still look so cheerful?

“Oh. I get it now,” he said with clarity.

The younger sister he treasured, the promise he’d made on that distant, rainy night to remain her older brother—it was all still within him. Just as he had seen something worth respecting in young Byakuya’s determination, he had also treasured Suzune.

But this Suzune who reveled in Byakuya’s death was nothing but a monster. She, in the truest sense, had become a demon.

“The sister I knew...is gone.”

His left arm twinged. There was heat. There was cold. The bits of what could be called order broke apart. The pain dimmed his vision to black. His pulsing arm took over everything—even the memories of that now-distant rainy night faded. He was helpless to suppress it, had no means to resist. Only one emotion dwelled in his heart: Hatred. Pure hatred for the demon that stood before him.

The hatred bubbling up inside him was all he had now. He had no way of knowing the yearning in Suzune’s heart. Instead, the only thing he could see was a loathsome monster taken by madness. The only thing he knew was that his dear sister was no more. This *demon* had taken both his loved one and his sister from him in one fell swoop.

Jinta’s body sprang to life. He stepped in, aiming for the demon’s neck. There was a sharp, disappointing *crack*. He had swung without hesitation or restraint, but the killing blow didn’t reach its target, and his sword snapped in two. The demon’s pale, dainty arm had struck it at an unperceivable speed.

“Jinta...?” the demon said. His surprise attack only earned him a curious head tilt to the side. She’d easily blocked the strike he intended to kill her with.

He wouldn’t win this battle. He *couldn’t* win this battle. Every ounce of his being understood that fact, but hatred still poured from his heart.

He tossed his broken blade aside. He had no weapon, but he wasn’t out of means to fight. He knew it instinctually, somehow. He laughed bitterly.

“I’m so pathetic. I couldn’t protect the woman I loved, I lost my dear family, my village is tarnished, and I’ve been humiliated. I have nothing left anymore...” He held his arm forward, not even taking up a stance. Feverish rage whirled inside him. His hate-filled heart, however, was eerily tranquil. Muscle and bone creaked and groaned, making impossible noises, as his body—more specifically, his arm—transformed.

He felt no shock at this change. The body was but a container for the heart, and the shape a heart took was decided by one’s emotions. If one’s emotions were unwavering, the heart and body would be just as unwavering.

Of course, if one’s heart were instead mired in hatred, then its container would take the appropriate form as well. His change was inevitable.

“No, not nothing,” Jinta began. His left arm from the elbow down had become dark red, now twice as large and solid with new-grown muscle. It resembled the arm of the demon he’d killed in the cave.

Human, a parting gift. Take it with you. No, it was not just a resemblance. This arm *was* the demon’s.

“I have one thing left,” he said. “I have my hatred for you.”

His wide-open eyes were red, the color of blood and rust. His time as a human ended here. He was of the supernatural now. Jinta, too, fell to hatred.

“...Huh?” A gasp escaped Suzune, either over her brother’s sudden change or his declaration of hatred for her. Her eyes began to tear up.

Without a care for his younger sister’s confusion, Jinta looked over his left arm and gave a small nod of approval. Finally, he understood what that muscular demon had meant when he said he’d achieved his purpose despite defeat. The demon had never intended to beat Jinta in the first place. His goal lay in the other, unexplained use of his power, *Assimilation*.

If the demon could take in other living beings with his body, then it followed that he could integrate himself into other living beings as well. The final attack of the demon’s arm hadn’t been an attack at all. It had been the demon assimilating himself into Jinta. His true goal had surely been to begin Jinta’s transformation into a spirit, a demon, and he had succeeded: Jinta, consumed

by hatred, had become a demon in body and soul.

Their long battle met its *true* end here. Victory belonged to the demon.

Jinta had marched off to slay the demon so proudly, only to end up dancing in the palm of his hand. What a fool he was. “How pathetic of me...” Jinta muttered to himself. “Still, I appreciate the parting gift.” He bent forward, then languidly lifted his left arm and pointed it at Suzune. “Now I can kill this *fiend* without a sword.”

Jinta already knew what the demon’s arm was capable of. The demon had gone through the effort of explaining everything before biting the dust, after all. By consuming other demons, the arm gained their powers. Currently, it only had a single power. “...*Superhuman Strength*.” His left arm began to swell even further. His muscles bubbled and writhed, expanding rapidly until it had roughly doubled in size. He was greatly asymmetrical, and any chance he’d pass as human was gone.

“What’s wrong?” Suzune said. “Why...” *Why are you looking at me with such hatred in your eyes?* The reason for her brother’s anger was beyond her. She could only respond with confusion. She clearly saw no wrong in killing Byakuya, and that only provoked him further.

“I just wanted to help you,” she said, trying to seek his forgiveness somehow. She staggered closer, making whatever excuse she could. “She...was just a whore.”

Hatred. All boiled down to pure, unadulterated hatred.

“Enough. Just shut up already,” he said flatly, denying her forgiveness. Something changed within him in that moment. His heart cut Suzune off for good. A limitless hatred welled up inside him.

Sensing this change, Suzune cast her gaze down, lips quivering. “O-oh... So, you’re abandoning me too. I thought you’d always be on my side...” All her love for him had meant nothing. He felt nothing but hate for her now.

Jinta said nothing, simply sharpening his glare. This was reply enough for Suzune, who let out a heartbroken wail. “Fine, then. I don’t need you. I don’t need anyone or anything anymore. If you won’t accept me, then this world can

go to hell...”

The air around her changed, and her voice lost its familiar ring as her tone lost its childishness and deepened. Her billowing rage could be felt even as she looked downwards. She tossed Byakuya’s head to the side crudely. Just as Jinta had severed his affection for her, so had her heart cut off Jinta for good.

“And so can you.” She lifted her head, revealing the face of a monster. Her scarlet eyes shone with vivid hatred. Her dainty fingers had stiffened, nails long and sharp as knives.

The two stared each other down, neither bothering to conceal their rancor. This standoff lasted only a moment. Suzune kicked forward with her left foot and closed the gap in a single step.

The air whistled as she swung her nails in a blunt attack. Jinta reacted but couldn’t dodge the strike fully. Skin and flesh tore and, before he could counterattack, her figure blurred away until she was out of his range.

She was fast. Simply too fast. Her movements were unrefined and lacking proper footwork, but that didn’t matter with her dizzying speed.

The air whistled again. She approached, slashing, then retreated, leaving him with a new laceration. Jinta didn’t even attempt to dodge her strike this time. His demonic eyes could follow her movements now, but she was a pure demon and he was not. As things stood, he had no chance of winning.

“Satisfied yet?” she said, after distancing from him. She was showing him mercy, sure of her victory.

He understood the fight was hopeless, but that was nothing new. Just as he could never beat Motoharu, he’d never managed to stop both Shirayuki and Suzune from running circles around him.

“We can end this here if you value y—”

“Didn’t I tell you to shut up?” he cut in, voice cold and leaden. It didn’t matter how impossible the odds were. His hate-possessed heart desired only one thing: the face of his enemy in anguish.

“I see... Fine.” She grimaced with sorrow and hate. She steeled herself. This

time she would end it, for real. She darted towards him with palpable malice and swung an upraised arm down with wild abandon.

Her nails cleaved into his chest, sending fresh blood dancing through the air—but it wasn't a fatal blow. He had taken a big step leftwards, so she'd only landed a glancing strike.

Without hesitation, she struck again at close range. She was practically a wild beast. She moved faster than she ever had before. This time, he could not dodge her. But that was fine.

Her nails pierced into his abdomen, and mind-numbing pain soon followed. He didn't care. He'd been expecting pain, and never intended to avoid it in the first place. Earlier, he had stepped back not to dodge her attack but to wind up for his own. He had pulled his leg back, and now his left arm as well, twisting his hips as his back foot dug into the floor.

If he had been human, a single one of her strikes would have spelled the end for him. But his body was unimaginably sturdier now. Her nails had sliced skin and even cut into his organs, but he was still alive and moving. He used this new sturdiness to take her blow, locking her arm against his abdomen and sealing her movement. No matter how fast she was, she would make an easy target when she was trapped and unable to move.

“Ah...” Now realizing what had happened, she tried to pull her arm out, but it was too late. She moved faster than he could, yes, but he had been one step ahead.

“Gaah!” He gave a short bellow, hacking up some blood. The floor warped under his left foot as his rustred eyes locked onto the golden-haired demon's frame. His monstrous left arm tore through the air. He held back none of his augmented strength as he swung at the loathsome fiend's stomach.

There was a sickening sensation against his fist. He felt skin break, flesh crush, innards mash, and even the impact of her spine.

Suzune was sent flying through the air and into the stand where Yarai had been enshrined. She couldn't even defend herself from the blow.

Wanna try it then? Go ahead, bonk me—

Or perhaps she was simply too stunned with disbelief, thinking Jinta would still never hit her, no matter how angry he got.

A cloud of dust billowed up at the back of the shrine. Jinta kept his eyes on it, not daring to blink. The fiend lay sprawled on the floor, but he knew—he'd felt it directly—his strike hadn't been a lethal one.

She rose to her feet with a gaping hole in her body.

"So, you can still stand," he said.

Unmoving, she hung her head limply. Blood flowed from her abdomen with no sign of stopping. The wound was deep, too deep for her to keep fighting, but it wasn't enough to kill her.

No matter how beautiful her appearance, she was still a demon. To kill her, he would have to take her neck or heart. Either that, or crush her head.

Another strike it was, then.

Jinta stepped forward, readying another punch. Hastened by his hate, he swung, aiming his fist at her pretty little face.

Suzune didn't move. She was unable to. At such close quarters, it was too late for her to dodge anyway.

This would be the end, Jinta was sure of it. Lost in his own hatred, he dealt the finishing blow.

"Sorry to rain on your parade yet again."

A third party intervened. The demon with the three-pronged spear must have been watching them, though it seemed she had appeared out of nowhere, just as she had the first time he saw her in the forest, what felt like so long ago.

His fist was already too far along to stop. It hit her, crushing flesh.

"You..." Jinta murmured. The fist meant for Suzune collided with the demon instead, crushing her heart. He tried to pull out his arm, but it wouldn't budge. He pulled again, harder this time, but found he couldn't put strength into his arm at all. *Superhuman Strength* had run its course, and he was weak without it.

Suzune remained stock-still throughout, unresponsive to anything. To her, the

female demon quietly cooed, **“Suzune-chan.”** Her heart was crushed, and her life would end shortly. A white vapor was already beginning to rise from her body. But she spoke gently despite her impending death. **“Run from here. I’m sure you feel hate. I’m sure you want to kill. But you must run and heal your wounds for now. You’ve yet to awaken to your true power. All demons awaken to a unique ability after living a century, although I feel yours might awaken even sooner. When that happens, feel free to lay waste to all you hate.”**

Urged forth by the dwindling embers of her hatred, Suzune finally moved. She brushed past Jinta, picked up Byakuya’s head from where she’d tossed it aside, and then walked to the exit.

“Suzune!” Jinta yelled.

She stopped, perhaps held by the last of her lingering regrets. Her body tensed, as though paralyzed. She shut her eyes and took a long inhale, reflecting on the happiness they had once shared.

Their now-distant night of rain.

Herself, abandoned.

The hand he extended to her then.

Since that night, Jinta had been the only thing she cared about. She was happy enough just being by his side. Even though she had been abandoned by her father and couldn’t be with her friend, being able to hold his hand was happiness enough for her.

Or so she had believed. In the end, it was all proved an illusion. In the end, her brother tossed her aside as well. There had never been a place for someone like her, not from the very start. She exhaled.

The demon told her to lay waste to all that she hated. Not the female demon just now, but the demon that was born from the hatred inside Suzune—her very own self. It screamed, seeking a target. But with Byakuya dead, what was there to hate? With the last dregs of her hatred, she searched her mind. She thought for a moment, and when her answer came, she frowned.

His outstretched hand had been everything to her. Betrayed by her

everything, there was only one thing she could hate.

“I despise everything. And so, I will lay waste to it all.” This was her answer. If her *everything* would betray her, then she would hate everything in turn. **“I will bring ruin to man, to this country, to all that exists in this world. Only then will I be able to go on.”**

She looked back at her brother, committing his image to mind. She had truly loved him. She was happy just to be by his side. *So why*, she wondered, *why did things have to end this way?*

“...Don’t forget me. No matter how much time may pass, a day will come when I appear before you again.”

Her feelings took to the wind. It was doubtful they reached him. Even so, she left, and did not turn to look back a second time.

Really, all I wanted was to make you smile, Jinta. Her faint murmur as she left reached no one.

After confirming Suzune was gone, the *Farsight* demon finally relaxed. Jinta pulled out his arm, and the demon fell, limp. The white vapor still rose from her body. Her end was near.

“Aha...aha ha ha ha ha ha. We did it. We really, really did it! Finally...I’ve achieved my purpose!” The demon laughed madly despite her encroaching death, as though boasting of victory.

Her laughter irritated Jinta, so he yelled at her, knowing full well he was just venting his anger. “This was your purpose? ...*This?!* ” Byakuya was dead, Jinta had become a demon, and he and Suzune had tried to kill one another. What *purpose* could be found in causing such a meaningless tragedy?

He gritted his teeth tightly enough to grind bone, but the demon was unfazed. **“Aha ha, yep. That’s right. I do feel bad for you all, really. But I had no choice.”**

A demon couldn’t escape their nature. Once they found a goal they wanted to achieve, they would set about fulfilling it no matter the cost. It had been the same with the muscular demon. No matter how much pity a demon might feel

for their victim, they couldn't let it stop them.

The female demon looked at peace, having achieved her purpose. **"I've seen what's to come with my power, *Farsight*. One day, this country will open to the world beyond its borders and progress. Humans will harness man-made lights and illuminate the very darkness around them."** She laughed no more, speaking quietly, an implacably fatigued, forlorn grace to her voice. Her narrowed eyes gazed at something distant. **"But we demons won't be able to keep up with the march of time. We'll be displaced by the newly advanced world and disappear. Their artificial lights will shine down and rob us of our place, until one day we'll only exist as characters in folktales."**

Her calm voice was tempered by a powerful determination. Jinta found himself bewildered—or rather, absorbed by—her change. He could not forgive the demons for what they'd done, but right now, with his anger quelled, he could not find the words to interrupt.

"But I refuse to accept that future. No way I'm taking extinction sitting down." The demon fixed her gaze on Jinta. **"Let me tell you what I saw, 170 years from now. That girl, Suzune-chan, becomes a calamity that threatens the end of all humanity. You cross the great divide of time to reach her and begin your deathmatch here in Kadono once again. From there...our lord of eternal darkness is born: our benevolent protector, the Demon God."**

Was that why they awakened Suzune as a demon and made Jinta into one? To set the stage for Suzune to become the Demon God, even at the cost of their own lives? Jinta grimaced, realizing he'd been dancing to their tune.

"You may hate us for what we've done, but the Demon God will protect my kind in the distant future. With the God's protection, we no longer need to fear the lights of man." The demon broke into a smile. It wasn't the same crazed smile as before but the calm smile of someone on their deathbed, satisfied with their life.

The last traces of anger in Jinta dissipated. If what this demon said was true, then she and the muscular demon weren't acting out of selfish desire but to protect what was dear to them. So, what difference was there between human and demon?

“This is enough for me. I can die happy, knowing my kind will have a future...” Holding nothing but hope for the distant hereafter, the demon’s body melted away into nothingness.

Part of Jinta wanted to say something before she faded, but no words came. He wanted to at least call her name, but he realized he didn’t even know that. In fact, he didn’t know the name of the demon he’d killed in the cave either. The two were without a doubt worthy of some honor, having laid down their lives for the future of their kind, and yet he’d killed them as if they were nameless beasts, as he had many others. That weighed on him more than he could have ever expected.

An unknown amount of time passed. The only person left in the shrine was Jinta—if he could even be called a *person* anymore.

“Shira...yuki...” He looked around the shrine, then spotted Byakuya’s body in the darkness. With faltering steps, he approached it. Her head had been cut off at the neck, and Yarai pierced her chest. He pulled out the sword and tossed it aside. He dropped to his knees and cradled her body in his arms. He could no longer smell her scent. Only the smell of blood remained.

“Ah...” He wrapped his arms around her back, pulling her into a tighter embrace. The blood that had accumulated on her chest was damp against his skin. It was a strange sensation, cold but hot. He felt as though he were melting into her from the wound.

Even now he could hear her voice. *Jeez, Jinta. You can’t do anything without your big sister.*

It was true, he couldn’t do anything without her. Not a single thing. He had learned to speak formally to avoid reflecting badly on her as shrine maiden guardian. He had trained to defeat demons because he wished for strength equal to her youthful resolve to protect Kadono. Even the way of life he’d devoted himself to was supported by one thing and one thing only.

“I loved you, Shirayuki...”

That alone. If there was one genuine thing about Jinta, it was his love for her,

deeper than anyone's. He would have given anything just to stay by her side.

“Shirayuki...”

But reality was cold and unfeeling. His role as shrine maiden guardian was meaningless. His vows were meaningless. He had failed miserably, unable to protect the woman he loved and hurting his only family with his own hands.

Tears spilled forth like a dam had burst. All Jinta could do was wail.

When he did, the lament of a demon echoed through the night.

He saw himself: pathetic, unable to do anything but cling to the body of his beloved, not knowing how to let go.

HE SAW a dream.

It was morning, a peaceful morning. The early rays of sunlight teased him awake.

“Good morning, Jinta.”

“Shirayuki... Good morning.” What they shared was just an ordinary everyday greeting, but it brought him joy. A smile rose to his face. “This still feels strange. I don’t think I can ever get used to waking up to your face every morning.”

“Why’s that? We’re married now. This is the new normal for us.”

“I guess... Yeah. Normal,” he said weakly, slipping into sadness. The smile he returned to her was faint.

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

“No, it’s just...I had a dream. A nightmare, really.”

A scene from outside time. Days spent in slumber. Feelings of hollowness.

“I dreamed you disappeared,” he told her.

“And that scared you?”

“It did. A lot.” He held her hand, and she squeezed it back. Overwhelmed by her warmth, tears flowed from his eyes.

“What’s up, Jinta? You sure want to be pampered today.”

“Not just today. Honestly, I always want to hold your hand.” That was the truth.

But the wish had gone unfulfilled. For a brief instant, the dream wavered.

“Wow. I’m surprised you can say that with a straight face,” she joked.

“I’m being serious here... Although, really, I’m happy enough just having you by my side.” He blushed. His face and chest felt hot.

“I’m happy enough being by your side too.”

“That’s good to hear. It’d be nice if these days could last forever.” Pleasant and sunny, and close enough to reach out and touch one another. This moment was dreamy in every way, but...

“But you won’t stay here with me, will you, Jinta?”

All dreams had to end.

“...Shirayuki.”

“You’re not someone who’d stay here. I know because we’re both the same. We’re both the type to stick to the path we’ve committed to instead of acting on our feelings for others... That’s why I know you won’t stay, why you’ll continue to live the same way you’ve lived all this time.”

The two were clumsy and awkward about it at times, but they’d always stuck firm to their beliefs.

Jinta said, “But I’ve lost you. I’ve lost my family, everything I tried to protect, the purpose of my blade, all of it. I have nothing left.”

“That’s not true. You’ve just lost sight of it temporarily. There’s no need to be so scared. I know you’ll find your answer one day.”

Their palms overlapped. As one, they parted. But their hearts remained together.

“Don’t worry. My feelings will always be by your side,” she said. Their feelings got across, from heart to heart, as they always did. “Now go, achieve your purpose.”

That was the end.

His consciousness melted into white, and his vision blurred bright.

If they had taken a different path, a happy future like this dream might’ve awaited them, one in which they could be married. But they didn’t choose such happiness. Their tiny wish would go unfulfilled.

With a pop, their transient days burst like bubbles along a water’s surface. But his heart could return there anytime if he recalled those moments. So, he wouldn’t mourn. For now, he’d close his eyes again, under the sunlight filtering through the leaves of the trees, and dream of that distant past.

He awoke suddenly. His hazy mind cleared as it roused from its dream. He had fallen unconscious at some point, after crying himself to exhaustion in the shrine.

The wound on his abdomen, which he'd thought fatal, was on its way to knitting shut. Given time, he expected it would heal completely. He was reminded that he was no longer human anymore. Still, the pain remained. He bore it and looked around the dim shrine, cruel reality rearing its face once again.

Byakuya's corpse was there, as was the sword that had killed her, Yurai.

He heaved a solitary sigh, then stood. His sleep had been short. Dawn hadn't yet broken. His body was cold from sleeping on the hardwood floor, and yet he felt somehow warm.

He saw a dream. A dream in which he took someone as his wife and lived a happy life with her. But that someone had told him that he wasn't the type to linger there, and he had to agree with the sentiment. At the end of it all, he was an inflexible man who lived by his chosen path, not his feelings. And he would likely remain such an inflexible man until the very day he died.

"Shirayuki..." He murmured the name of the loved one he failed to protect. Shirayuki had been his guidepost. She gave him direction in life. Now, he was thrust onto the night road without a lantern, unable to see anything through the darkness surrounding him. But his hatred would serve as his new guidepost.

Suzune had said she would lay waste to it all. He had nothing left, no purpose to wield his blade for. So, he would make stopping her his new purpose. The hatred dormant in his heart had given birth to a calamity, so he would assume responsibility and stop that calamity.

"I'm going, Shirayuki."

With new purpose, Jinta left the shrine. His tears had long since dried.

Daybreak came and news of Itsukihime's death reached the village. The news

came as a great shock, made only greater by the fact that Byakuya's lineage, which had filled the role of Itsukihime since time immemorial, had come to an end with her.

The influential figures of the village held a service for Byakuya's body and immediately got to discussing their options regarding the next Woman of Fire, if there was even to be one. It wasn't Byakuya's death that they mourned, exactly, but rather the loss of the Itsukihime who prayed for Kadono's prosperity. The true source of the village's grief was the absence of their spiritual pillar. Jinta understood that this was just how things were, but he was saddened by the reality all the same.

"...That should be everything."

After passing out in the shrine for the night, Jinta returned home and changed his clothes. He now wore cloth coverings over his hands and wrists, protective cloth leg wraps, a sedge hat, and a windbreaker effective at warding off rain. Next to him was a pair of bundles tied together with twine. The bundles contained his hand towel, a few rolls of hemp twine, a folding fan, a portable brush-and-ink case, and other such small articles, as well as his spare kimono robe and straw sandals, medicines, a white sarashi cloth, a travel lantern with a candle, and a flint for starting fires. All his savings were in his chest pocket, and he had packed a few metal items for when he ran out of travel expenses. Metal products from Kadono could fetch a high price; they'd keep him afloat for a while.

He slung one of the bundles over his shoulder, balancing the two. With this, he was ready. Ideally, his beloved sword would've been on his hip, but it had broken in his fight with the demon in the cave. He would have to procure another one somehow, some other time.

With his preparations complete, Jinta walked to the entrance of the house. He put on his straw sandals, stood up, and looked back on his home one last time. He had lived here with Motoharu, Shirayuki...and Suzune. It was a place full of memories.

He let himself slip into nostalgia for a brief moment, then exhaled it all out with a sigh. He had turned his back on this happiness by his own accord. He had

no right to bask in it any longer. Yet he felt he could still see *her* innocent smile lingering somewhere inside the empty home. But that only made something dark inside him stir.

He cut his pointless reminiscing short and opened the sliding door, then stepped out of his home for good. Ahead of him, however, the village chief approached. He held a sword enclosed in a cloth bag in his left hand and had a somber look about him.

“Chief...”

“I heard some of what happened last night from Kiyomasa.” The man cut straight to the point. He already knew about Suzune becoming a demon, yet his expression seemed one of pity rather than judgment. “Will you fill me in on the rest?”

Jinta hesitated, but as chief of the village, the man had a right to know. So Jinta told him everything, bit by bit, not hiding a single thing. He told him of how Suzune had killed Byakuya, of how he himself became a demon, and of the future the female demon had seen.

The village chief listened to the absurd tale in silence. After it was over, he paused for a brief moment, then looked at Jinta head-on and asked, “Now what?”

The answer was obvious, of course. A glance at Jinta’s current get-up made it clear. But the question wasn’t to ascertain *what* Jinta would do next but with how much *conviction*. Understanding this, Jinta confidently stated, “I’ll depart Kadono.”

It wasn’t an impulsive decision. He was completely certain that leaving Kadono was a necessary step. The future would come without fail, as would his reunion with his younger sister. To prepare for that reunion, he had to leave his hometown behind and move forward.

Jinta continued, “The demon said the Demon God will appear in Kadono 170 years from now, and that Suzune will bring ruin to the world.”

Suzune. Just saying the name made dark emotions swirl inside him. She was once so dear to him, and now so hated. He closed his eyes to avoid

acknowledging his confused heart. In his mind, he could see the vestiges of their past. He understood his choice would trample over those memories.

“Fortunately, my body is that of a demon’s now. I will live over a thousand years if I so choose. I’ll make my way to the future and stop the Demon God in Kadono then.”

He would face Suzune in the future. With nothing left to protect, living to face her again was all that remained to him. He’d always been a man whose only worth was in wielding a blade. This was the only way he could live.

“I’ll go to Edo first. I need to expand my horizons, discipline my sword and mind. In Edo, I’ll be able to meet many, and reinvent myself.”

“Are you sure this is the path you wish to take? You understand *who* this Demon God will be, I’m sure?”

“...I do. But I have to fix this mistake I’ve made, somehow,” Jinta said, with some emotion creeping into his voice.

Sternly, as though warning Jinta not to lie to himself, the village chief rebuked, “There is nothing righteous about this path.”

Jinta would face a demon that threatened all of humanity. On the surface, that sounded noble, but underneath lay nothing but his own hatred for Suzune. Hearing the truth pointed out hurt.

“...Perhaps not,” Jinta replied. He tried to feign calm, but his tension shone through. The loathing in his heart wouldn’t go away.

“You’re okay with this then? You’ll give yourself over to hatred and cut down your own sister?” The village chief reiterated the point, not beating around the bush this time.

Jinta was surprised by the village chief’s directness, lost as to what his intent could be. Unsure how else to reply, Jinta offered an out-of-place smile and simply told the truth. “I don’t know, really.”

A breeze blew by. The warmth of early summer caressed his skin, but it did nothing to lift his spirits.

“Suzune is my dear family. But I loathe her for killing Shirayu...our princess.

Even now my hatred is urging me to kill her.” Jinta looked up into the distant sky, as though searching for the source of the breeze. Clouds drifted above, painted on a canvas of blue, but nothing could change the color of his heart. “I still don’t feel I was wrong to hit her. But that lack of guilt itself is eating away at me.”

Suzune may have taken Byakuya from him and trampled over all he valued, but his love for his family had once been absolutely real. Even now, with all the hate he felt, he wasn’t sure he wanted to kill her. In his mind he avoided the issue by saying he would *face* her instead of *kill* her. He knew this wasn’t something he could put off forever, but he couldn’t choose his own nature.

“I see. That’s a relief.” Oddly enough, the village chief sounded happy to hear Jinta’s uncertainty. Jinta dropped his gaze to see the man smiling warmly, the first time he’d ever seen him that way. “I feared you’d choose bloodshed now that you’re a demon, but it seems there’s still *something* left inside you.”

Really? Jinta had to wonder. He had lost everything: the woman he loved, his precious family, the things he protected, the purpose of his blade, his very self. What could be left in a man who abhorred his own sister enough to kill her? What could be left but hate?

“You don’t really wish to kill Suzune, do you?” the village chief asked.

Jinta found he couldn’t answer. As much as he wanted to remain her brother, he wanted to kill her even more. Both were pure, genuine desires, as contradictory as that was. He said, “It’s impossible for me to answer that. I don’t have it in me to forgive her, but I’m still hesitant to kill her. I’m not sure what I’ll do when we meet again. I don’t know where to direct all this hate. I don’t know why I wield my blade. Really, I just don’t know a single thing.”

Even after losing everything and being left with nothing but hate, even after deciding he would stop the Demon God, he couldn’t make up his mind about whether or not he could kill Suzune.

“If at all possible, I want to find another way,” he went on. Even after becoming a demon, he hadn’t abandoned his human heart. “My hatred remains, but hearts do change. The day might come when I can forgive her. So, I want to hold off on answering your question a bit longer.”

Perhaps there was a way to erase the hatred in him. Then he could properly *face* her instead of *kill*. Whether this wish was genuine or simply an illusion of lingering attachment, Jinta didn't know. But he wanted to believe. He wanted to believe there existed a future where he could both stop the Demon God and save Suzune. Even in the depths of his hatred, he wanted to hold on to his fleeting dreams.

"I see... Then what will you do if Suzune ends up becoming the Demon God?" the village chief asked, challenging Jinta's dreams with harsh reality.

In the end, dreams were just that and nothing more. Jinta might find it in himself to forgive Suzune at some point in his journey, and perhaps together they might choose peace. But what would he do if she chose ruin instead?

"I'm the one who forced her to such an end, so I'll make things right." Jinta understood what needed to be done. As her older brother and as her fellow demon, he would make things right. Be it through forgiveness or death. "If, at the end of my journey, Suzune chooses ruin and becomes the Demon God..." His voice trailed off. He would be lying if he said he had no doubts, but he didn't try to hide that. "Then...I will probably have to put an end to her."

He was willing to turn his back on his dear family twice if he had to. However, if that came to be, he'd have no right to live on. He'd offer up his severed head before her grave as his final apology.

"...You'd go that far just to fix your errors?"

"Yes. But until the time comes, 170 years from now, I'll keep searching for my answer to your question." Jinta looked ahead. He had found something to guide him.

The village chief nodded with understanding and pulled out a long tachi sword from its cloth bag. "Take it."

Jinta tensed when he saw the sword. He recognized it right away. It rested in a scabbard of Kadono-made iron. This particular sword's history in Kadono stretched back to even before the Warring States period. It was Yarai—the sword that killed Byakuya.

The sword had been looked after by generations of Itsukihime and

worshipped as a symbol of Mahiru-sama. It was just as much of a spiritual pillar to the village as the Woman of Fire herself. It was unheard of to even think of taking Yarai from the shrine, much less hand it over to another person, as the village chief now did.

“A thousand years can come and go, and Yarai won’t rust. I can think of no better weapon to join you on your journey,” the village chief said.

Jinta hesitated, but not because it was a sacred sword. He hesitated because this was the sword that robbed Byakuya of her life.

Still, the village chief seemed insistent that he take it, and Jinta couldn’t stare blankly at the sword forever. Hesitantly, he reached out for Yarai. To his surprise, he felt no disgust in touching it. It had the profound weight of a tachi sword and the cold touch of metal, yet it somehow felt warm.

“Try drawing it.”

Jinta did just that, popping Yarai from its scabbard. Its thick edge shone dully in the sunlight. Its temper pattern ran in parallels, rather than in scalloped or jagged edges, and its cutting edge was built with a focus on durability. Despite its long years in the shrine, it was a sword clearly forged for battle, not artistry.

“You won’t need to worry about Yarai breaking against any lesser demons,” the village chief said. “Hm... With this, you’ve become Yarai’s official owner. As is tradition, you are now known as *Jinya*.”

“But I can’t take something this valuable,” Jinta protested.

“It’s fine. It’s just a regular old sword now that the Itsukihime line has died out. It’s much better off in your hands than collecting dust in the shrine. Moreover...” He hesitated for a moment, before weakly adding, “I’m sure the princess would be happier this way.”

Hearing his guilty tone, Jinta finally understood why the man had come. He wasn’t here as the village chief. He was here, as himself, to see Jinta.

The village chief deeply lowered his head and said, “Forgive me. I knew you and the princess had feelings for one another. But Kiyomasa also had feelings for her. I encouraged their marriage for his sake, under the pretense of Kadono’s future... I invited this tragedy.”

Jinta was shocked to see the man lower his head. The village chief remained half bowed, still as a mouse, with his feelings of regret clear. Jinta knew he was being genuine. He also knew the man had simply been fighting for his own family's sake. "Please, raise your head. There's nothing wrong with wishing for your son's happiness."

The guilt still lingered in the man's eyes. Trying to set him at ease, Jinta continued, "Shirayuki was happy to protect the peace of the village, and Kiyomasa loved her. There was nothing wrong with the decision." He had felt some bitterness over their marriage, but Jinta genuinely believed the choice was correct, even if it came from this man's selfish desire to help his son...and even if it had hurt him directly. There was no way an action done for the sake of another could be wrong.

"The demons were the same. They fought for the future of their kind. It's only natural that everybody fights for their own."

Good and evil were relative. Everybody simply wanted to protect what was dear to them. Yet Jinta had given into hatred and turned his back on the one he swore to protect. Perhaps he was the only true demon.

"Still, I'm ashamed..."

"It's all water under the bridge," Jinta said. "More importantly, what will you do now?"

"I will simply continue as I have. As chief, I will protect Kadono. Hopefully that can give the princess some peace. Hm..." The guilt faded from the man's eyes, replaced by a look of inspiration. He put on a mischievous smile and said, "Hm, yes... I think I'll create a shrine. That way you'll have something waiting for you when you return to Kadono at the end of your journey. As for the shrine's name...we'll call it 'Jinta.' The Jinta Shrine. Ha, silly, but it'll do."

The village chief chuckled, something Jinta had never seen him do. Shrines could be called "jinja" in Japanese, so the Jinta Shrine—or Jinta Jinja—was something of a pun, although not a particularly clever one, mind you. But the man quickly turned serious and said, "The passage of time is cruel. After a century, I doubt there will be any here who know of you. Perhaps you won't even recognize the village itself. Our lives are terribly short compared to a

demon's."

The village chief seemed to have an inkling of what the village's future might look like, but Jinta couldn't envision a single thing. He didn't know what awaited him tomorrow, much less in a century.

"But even if our lives are short, there are still things we can leave behind. Let me leave this shrine behind for you. When you return someday and find it, feel free to shed a tear."

Nothing that exists is changeless. Motoharu had said it, and now the village chief was saying it too. Jinta was familiar with the words, but he still didn't fully understand the meaning they held, leaving some of the village chief's intent beyond his comprehension.

The village chief left then, and Jinta found himself unable to say anything as he watched him go. Alone, he looked down at Yarai in his hands. The sword had gone a thousand years without the slightest sign of aging. Its presence reminded him of the gravity of his own undertaking.

The passage of time is cruel. Jinta let the village chief's words sink in. The sword felt just a bit heavier in his hands.

After parting with the village chief, Jinta made for the edge of the village.

"Jinta-sama!" Chitose called out to him as he walked past the teahouse.

He turned around and gave a curt, "Yes?"

"U-um," she said, looking at her feet. "I heard what happened to the princess..."

She hemmed and hawed, unable to calm down. The village was small; there was a good chance she already knew about Suzune's disappearance as well. Jinta forced a soft smile to try and calm her.

"Jinta-sama..."

"Please, I don't deserve to be called that anymore. I couldn't protect anyone." His forced smile strained into a derisive grin. As though merely leaving for a casual stroll, he said, "Sorry. Let me be out of your hair."

Unable to accept such a farewell, Chitose looked at him with worry and asked, “Jinta-nii...will you come back?”

He avoided her gaze, surprised by her directness. Right now, though, the worry she showed him was unbearable. He could only give a pathetic half answer in return: “If I come by again, I’d like to try your isobe mochi once more.”

She accepted this with a big nod. She knew what he really meant but put on a strong front regardless. “All right. Let’s eat some together next time... Take care.”

Her eyes filled with tears. He knew he hadn’t given her the answer she wanted to hear—*And from then on, I’ll be the one to protect you*—but he didn’t want to make any more promises he knew he couldn’t keep. He walked away, then, briefly waving in lieu of parting words.

He felt the gaze of others following him as he left the village, but he didn’t stop. Because of Byakuya’s death, the villagers were in a state of panic. Occasionally, the people he passed would whisper to one another and shoot him grim looks. They were probably gossiping about the pathetic man who had failed to protect anything at all, as was their right. Kadono had welcomed him, an outsider. But far from repaying their kindness, he had brought about disaster and now was fleeing the village. Pathetic.

Still, he would leave. He had to move forward.

Or he would if his way weren’t blocked.

Standing before him was Kiyomasa, broken arm in a sling. He glared straight at Jinta. He’d likely been waiting for him.

“Kiyomasa...”

Jinta had heard how Kiyomasa had fought the female demon and lost. But she hadn’t killed him, for some reason. The village chief said that she had killed the other defenders, but not him. Perhaps she and the muscular demon had wanted to avoid killing anyone if they could. Perhaps, in the end, the only threat to this village had been...

Jinta shook the thought out of his head. There was no point entertaining

them; what was done was done.

“So, you’re leaving then,” Kiyomasa said. His voice was curt but lacked energy. His broken arm must have been painful. The life seemed drained from him.

“Yeah,” Jinta replied.

“Where to?”

“For now, Edo. I hear demons appear there. I’ll hunt them and train myself.”

“So that you can kill Suzune-chan?”

Jinta hesitated. He didn’t want to kill her, but his hatred remained. He had no answer to give that’d be truthful, so he brushed aside the question. “Don’t move around too much. It’s not good for your arm.”

He tried to walk past Kiyomasa but was blocked once again. Jinta raised a brow and thought to say something, but was stunned into silence.

Kiyomasa was crying without even bothering to wipe away his tears. He said, “...I hate everything about you. I hate how you’re strong, calm, and can fight demons like it’s nothing. I hate how you’re able to earn everyone’s respect without relying on someone else’s backing. But most of all...I hate how Byakuya loved you.” He let his true feelings show, not caring about shame or who might overhear. “But I never, *never* once wanted to take her away from you. I was fine just being by her side. That alone was enough to make me happy. And yet I... I...” His voice trailed off.

Ah, of course, Jinta thought. The truth was that Kiyomasa himself hadn’t wished for the marriage. Kiyomasa loved her, yes, but he only wanted her to be happy—even if that happiness didn’t include him. He would have been okay just being able to look back on his feelings for her, one day, as a beautiful, distant memory. But he was the son of the village chief. Regardless of what he actually wished for, his status alone made Itsukihime his. In a sad twist of fate, that status might have made him unhappier than he would have been if he weren’t the village chief’s son.

“It was the same with me, Kiyomasa.”

“...What?”

“I was happy enough being by her side... Really, just that would’ve been enough.”

They were the same. Jinta would’ve been happy continuing to serve as shrine maiden guardian and protecting the determination Byakuya had shown him that day, even if they couldn’t be husband and wife. Just being by her side, in any form, would have been enough.

He let out a small sigh. For the first time, talking to Kiyomasa didn’t aggravate him. Rather, it brought him a certain sense of peace. “If only we’d talked a bit more. Then maybe...”

Then maybe things would’ve ended differently, he was about to say but thought better of it. Such words were meaningless now and only laid the blame on Kiyomasa. Instead, Jinta smiled and said, “Then maybe we could’ve been friends.” He sincerely thought it might’ve been possible too. The two both bore the same feelings for the same person, as well as the same pain. Surely, they could’ve found some common ground.

“Don’t be stupid,” Kiyomasa spat back, still in tears. But he looked as though a weight had been lifted off his shoulders.

Jinta was happy that the last face he saw in Kadono would be in this sunny context. Thanks to Kiyomasa, he felt a little lighter. “I’ll be off, then. I doubt we’ll meet again.” He made for the road to Edo. It’d be a lie to say he wasn’t reluctant to go. Kadono had been his home for many years. But he couldn’t stop now.

“Jinta!” Kiyomasa yelled from behind. He was in tears, his voice feeble, yet straining every vocal cord he had. “Suzune was the same as me... She loved you the same way I loved Byakuya. Things may have ended how they did, but she was just acting on her love for you...”

The image of his sister surfaced in Jinta’s mind. He was her dear family, but her feelings for him were somewhat different than his feelings for her. In a sense, their bond as siblings might have been broken from the start... No, what point was there in thinking about this now?

Jinta forced those thoughts into the recesses of his mind. There was something he wasn’t meant to know lurking at the end of that train of thought.

He continued to walk as though fleeing his own uncertainty.

“Please...at the very least, don’t forget that,” Kiyomasa pleaded.

Jinta didn’t turn to look back or even reply. He couldn’t. He had no way of knowing how Suzune really felt, and it was too late for it to even matter. The two had become demons who despised one another. That was all that had meaning anymore.

Back in the cave, the muscular demon had said it was a demon’s nature to carry out their purpose and that a demon could never escape their nature. Having become a demon, Jinta finally understood what he meant.

He still remembered how Suzune had smiled and told him she was happy just being by his side. Those words had saved him on that distant rainy night. He remembered their days of happiness and knew she was still dear to him. She was still his precious family. But a deep loathing boiled in his heart now when he recalled her pure, innocent smile.

His hatred could not even be called an emotion anymore, but a bodily function. Just as his heart pulsed and his lungs breathed, his hate would follow him wherever he went. No matter how much he still loved or treasured her. That was simply the demon he was.

Under the shadow of his hatred, and with his heart still clinging to humanity, Jinta set out from Kadono with Yarai as his only companion. The road ahead seemed to stretch on indefinitely, Edo nowhere near in sight.

“So, 170 years, huh?”

He looked beyond the winding road and thought of the shapeless future, even more distant than Edo itself.

He heard a distant voice: *Human, for what purpose do you wield your blade?*

One day, he would return to Kadono and reunite with Suzune. What would he do then? Would he conclude his journey with demonic hatred and cut her down? Or would he find it in himself to forgive her and regain his humanity? He had no way of knowing. So, instead, he prayed he’d find his answer before that time came.

“It’s a long road ahead.”

Jinta—no, *Jinya* set his sights forward and began his long, long journey.

As cracks appeared in the rule of the Tokugawa shogunate, wickedness grew rampant in the world.

A tragedy took place in Kadono, a village a distant 130 ri from Edo. Their shrine maiden known as Itsukihime was killed by a demon, bringing their sacred lineage to an end and visiting much pain on their village. Without a shrine maiden to pray to the Goddess of Fire, the village had no means to connect to the spiritual and would surely fall to decline.

But, in the grand scheme of history, such an event was a mere speck of dust. The vicissitudes of a lone village were not worth remembrance. Similarly, the journey that a certain young man embarked on was one of trifling importance.

Following Kadono’s tragedy, this youth left the village. His future was unknown to all, even to himself. Much like leaves along the river, he simply drifted forward.

He would be remembered by no one.

His name would be recorded in no histories.

His was the journey of the one who walked the line between man and demon.

It was year eleven of the Tenpo Era, 1840 by the Gregorian calendar.

Interlude: What Remains

AND SO, time flies on by.

What follows is a tale from the past.

Once upon a time, there lived a village princess and a young man who was always by her side, her protector. She and the young man were close, having been friends since childhood. Thanks to him, the princess was able to live a happy life, despite rarely being allowed to step foot outside of her own home.

Unknown to them, however, they were watched by two others from afar. One of these observers was the village chief's son. The village chief's son loved the princess, and so he hated the young man and treated him cruelly. The other observer was the young man's younger sister. This sister had been childhood friends with the princess too, but she was saddened by the thought of her dear brother leaving her, because she knew he loved the princess. Even so, she lived life as though nothing was wrong.

One day, two demons attacked the village. Thinking they had come to kidnap the princess, the young man left to fight them. He found one of the demons deep in the forest, but the other demon slipped by him and made for the village.

After a great battle, the young man slew the first demon and rushed to the village. But little did he know, the demons weren't his only enemy.

"Now's my chance!" Overjoyed by the young man's absence, the village chief's son plotted to make the princess his. Using his position in the village, he forced the princess to marry him. With her protector away, the princess couldn't object to the marriage. And so, the village chief's son succeeded. The princess agreed to be his.

But the young man's sister witnessed this and grew furious. Only her anger

was not directed at the village chief's son. "How could you betray my brother like this?!" The sister was instead angry at the princess for hurting her dear brother—but not by her own volition. By the sister's side was the other demon, who directed the sister's anger towards the princess.

Though it was all a plot hatched by the demon, there was no stopping the sister's hatred. Her heart burned with jealousy, and she transformed into the Red Demon and killed her friend, the princess.

"My sister, what have you done?" The young man returned at the worst possible moment and watched as his sister killed the woman he loved. His heart burned with rage, and he became the Blue Demon. He then slew the demon that had deceived his sister and attacked the Red Demon in turn.

Distraught to find herself now hated by her brother, the Red Demon fled. "I loved you. If I am to be hated by you, then I don't need this world at all. I will one day return to destroy the very world." Leaving nothing but an ill-omened curse behind, she disappeared.

And so, the Blue Demon lost the woman he loved, his family, and himself.

It is said he left the village then, declaring that he, a demon, no longer had the right to live among humans. It is also said that he left in search of the Red Demon, her whereabouts unknown. Either way, no one knows where he went.

However, there exists a handful of rare accounts of a hero in Edo known as the "Sword Demon." Some believe that these accounts are of the Blue Demon, as he stopped in Edo along his journey. It is also believed by some that the princess's soul joined the Blue Demon on his journey.

This has been the tale of *The Princess and the Blue Demon* as passed down in Kadono Village (now Kadono City of Hyogo Prefecture).

—The Princess and the Blue Demon.
Spirit Tales of Ancient Japan.
Kono Publishing.

February 2009

I live on the grounds of a shrine somewhat well known locally for its cherry blossom trees. My father's the kannushi chief priest here, and my mother is its shrine maiden. Our shrine's been around since the Edo period, or so I hear. To be perfectly honest, I know little about the shrine's history and don't exactly care much to learn.

It was a Sunday morning with few shrine-goers. I noticed a bunch of leaves were scattered around the grounds and so, having time to kill, got to sweeping them with a bamboo broom.

I figured it would take some time to sweep the whole grounds myself, but it didn't take long at all. I finished in less than an hour, ending up with a nice, tall mountain of leaves in one corner of the grounds.

"It's so cold today..." I grumbled. I blew hot air on my numb hands to warm them. My breath was white. A cold wintry wind kicked up a small wave of dust. The sky was dim with clouds that looked like inkblots. Midwinter was devoid of color and felt a little gloomy.

"Oh, Miyaka-chan? Did you clean the grounds for me?" a voice said. I turned to find my mother happily eyeing the place. She continued, "I'm sorry, I'm sure you'd rather be doing something else with your day off."

"Not at all. It's not like I have anything else going on," I replied curtly.

My mother seemed to see past my brusque exterior, though, and smiled. "Thank you, dear. Say, why don't we have you 'look the part' as well?"

"Er, I'd rather not." By "look the part," my mother meant changing into a shrine maiden outfit like the one she was wearing. Personally, I felt wearing it was a bit too embarrassing. It looked good on my mother because she seemed young for her age and was quite pretty, but it looked absolutely terrible on someone like me. Plus, I'd totally be teased by my friends if they came by and saw.

Well, my best friend would probably say I looked cute, but even that was embarrassing to deal with in its own way.

"Aw, don't be like that. C'mon!"

“Wha—Mom?!”

Of course, it didn’t actually matter what I wanted, as my mother was going to half force me into the clothes regardless, as she always did. Contrary to the gentle smile she always wore, she could be quite assertive.

“Here we go again...” I sighed. My mother looked at me with an overjoyed smile.

Inevitably, I wound up wearing the shrine maiden outfit. Somehow it always fit me perfectly every time I put it on. She probably had it altered as I grew, which was kind of sweet of her, I guess. I dunno.

“You look beautiful, Miyaka-chan.”

I could tell her praise was genuine, but that only made me even more embarrassed. Exasperated, I sighed. “Mom...”

“Yes, dear?”

“I’ve been wondering for a while now...why are you so adamant about making me a shrine maiden?” Our shrine wasn’t a famous tourist destination, only just well known enough to have an entry in the listings. The plot of land was big enough to warrant a kannushi chief priest living on site, but my mother could handle all the shrine maiden-related work by herself. Of course, I helped out on busy occasions like festivals, but we also hired helpers then, so I wasn’t *really* needed.

Don’t get me wrong: I’m not trying to say I don’t want to work, I just have some second thoughts about this whole shrine maiden outfit thing!

“Ah, that. Well, it’s because it’s the duty of girls born to this shrine to become shrine maidens, I suppose,” my mother answered with a soft smile. Even as her daughter, I had to admit she was beautiful. Her long black hair gave her the impression of a classic Japanese beauty. Someone like her would always draw in shrine-goers. Someone like me, on the other hand—too tall and with long hair tinged somewhat brown—was totally unsuited for the job. She said, “Of course, I won’t force you to inherit my shrine work after you graduate high school. You should live the life you want to live. But until then, I’d like you to be a shrine maiden.”

She glanced sidelong at the cherry blossom trees on the grounds, her gaze fixed on something even more distant. I almost thought she was daydreaming when she suddenly walked over to the offerings box set right before the shrine. She beckoned me to follow, so I did.

She stared unblinkingly at the go-shintai, the physical object that housed the shrine's deity, sitting beyond the offerings box and through the wooden lattice grid. This go-shintai wasn't actually our shrine's go-shintai. If memory served, it was called the Fox's Mirror and had been moved to our shrine after a branch shrine burned down in a fire. I had absolutely no idea why it had been placed in our shrine though, to be honest.

"I have two rules I need you to follow," my mother said. Her tone was as gentle as always, but I could feel the gravity in her voice. "One, if you give birth to a girl, her name must contain the character 'yo' or 'ya,' as in 'night'.⁷ Two, don't let the line of shrine maidens die out. These are the rules our ancestors decided on. My grandmother was careful to instill these rules in me to pass them on to the next generation."

"Why?" I asked.

"Dunno."

Her reply caught me off guard. I made a face. I fully expected the reasoning behind all these traditions to be something super serious, so hearing her blow all that expectation away with a "whatever" shrug really threw me. I said, "What's up with that?"

"I don't know why these are our traditions, and I don't really care to know. When my grandmother had this talk with me, she seemed to be having fun. That alone is why I choose to uphold them." She seemed to reflect on that moment, basking in nostalgia. I had never met her grandmother—my great-grandmother, that is. I wondered what she was like.

My mother continued, "Besides, even if we don't understand these traditions ourselves, I'm sure they were once very important to the ones who made them long ago. So, let's maintain them. Traditions exist to be upheld—not because they themselves have meaning, but because the feelings they hold do." She turned to look at me straight on. Her face had the same gentleness, but her

eyes were now serious. “That’s why we’ve continued to inherit that character in our names. So that the distant feelings of the ones who came long before us have a place to return to after all these long years.”

If I could say so as her own daughter, I thought she looked particularly beautiful in that moment. I wasn’t sure how to describe it, but she had the same invigorating quality as a clear sky.

“The next to give those distant feelings a place to return to in the future will be you...Miyaka-chan.” She smiled warmly with unmatched gentleness. Could the secret behind her gentleness be the way she had protected the feelings of untold strangers all this time?

“Mother...”

“Oh, it’s about time I start making lunch.” Having said what she wanted to say, she left to return to the house. Her about-face was so sudden that it made me wonder if all that solemnity I had just felt had been just a misunderstanding on my part.

“...What was all that about?” Unsure how to make heads or tails of it all, I stood on the shrine grounds in a daze. Eventually, I figured there wasn’t much point in overthinking it and decided to do more cleanup until lunchtime.

After I’d been cleaning for a while, a shrine-goer came by. It was somewhat rare to have people stopping by so early on a Sunday morning, so I took notice. He was tall and wore what seemed to be a brand-new boys’ uniform. I figured he was a high schooler. He had a bag for a bamboo sword in his hand, so he was probably in the kendo club or something. The insignia on the collar of his uniform was that of Modori River High School, the school I would be attending soon. He seemed a bit older than me, so he might be my senpai. Maybe he came by to buy a charm for the new school year?

As I was lost in thought, the boy approached me directly for some reason. Was he going to hit on me? Or maybe ask me to take a picture for him?

He said, “Are you the shrine maiden here? There’s something I’d like to ask you, if so.”

I was flummoxed for a moment before realizing, with some shock, that I was

in fact still wearing my shrine maiden outfit. No wonder he thought I worked here. Wow, I dropped the ball hard there. Still, I might as well answer his questions. Before that, though, I had to correct one thing. “No, I’m not exactly a shrine maiden here but an Itsukihime.”

“An...Itsukihime...?” the boy said. He seemed confused.

No surprises there. The word meant nothing to most people. Used to this kind of confusion, I put on my best business smile and explained, “That’s what we call the shrine maidens of this shrine. Nobody really knows why, but it’s been the custom since long ago.”

Yes, nobody knew why, but the shrine maidens at this shrine were called Itsukihime. Perhaps the custom had meaning to the people of the past, like my mother said. Thinking of it that way brought a smile to my face.

“Is that right...” the boy said, seeming to ruminate over the word. He then asked, “Excuse me, but could you tell me the name of this shrine?”

I tilted my head a bit in confusion. The name was on the torii gate at the entrance, but maybe he didn’t see it? I suppose it *was* somewhat easy to miss. Still thinking it somewhat strange, I answered, “Of course. This is the Jinta Shrine.”

The name came from back when Kadono City was a prosperous iron town. Jinta was the name of the village’s guardian, and the shrine was apparently established to support and protect the village, just as that Jinta person once did.

“I see...” The boy closed his eyes in thoughtful silence. And then a lone tear ran down his cheek.

I was shocked to see a boy my age crying without even trying to hide it. His tear didn’t seem to be one of sadness, however, but of something that welled up within him and overflowed. I had never seen a boy cry in such a way and couldn’t help but be stunned by the beauty of his emotion.

“Chief...you really left me a place to return to.”

He said something too quietly for me to make out. I only understood that it was said with heavy emotion. With a clear, sunny smile, the boy said, “Thank you very much. I’ll be out of your way now.”

“Huh? Um, didn’t you want to ask something?”

“I have my answers already. You gave me the very words I was hoping to hear.”

I hadn’t a clue what he meant. He graced me with a gentle smile, then turned on his heel and left without looking back. No matter how I looked at him, he seemed about my age, but his back now seemed impossibly broad.

“...What was all *that* about?” I was once again left alone on the grounds, unsure what to make of it all. I stared blankly off into the distance. The only conclusion I reached was that this world had some pretty strange people in it.

My mother appeared then. “Miyaka-chan, lunch is ready... Is something wrong?”

“Nah, it’s nothing.” I quickly forgot all about the boy and returned home.

I glanced up at the far, distant sky. At some point, without my noticing, the thin clouds had cleared and the grounds were bathed in the glow of the winter sun.

And so, time flies on by.

The feelings held by those of the past are lost to the mists of time, doomed to fade like bubbles along a water’s surface. Nothing that exists is changeless, and yet miniscule fragments will always remain.

The journey he made was hopelessly long. But the feelings he once held still remain near.

The day the two reunite will be here soon.

Side Story: Embodiment of Jealousy

JUST AS THE NORTHERN WINDS of early autumn began to blow, the Irazu Forest, extending north of the village, began to take on a duller shade. It was a season in which the dew that wet the leaves frosted ever so slightly. The fire-worshipping, ironmaking village felt the chill through the day and night. Such a chill might vanish by the sweltering flames of the Workshop, but up in the shrine of Itsukihime there was no escaping it.

“It’s gotten cold lately,” Byakuya sighed. There was nothing to warm oneself with in the tatami mat area beyond the bamboo screen. “It’s still bearable now, but things will only get worse from here.”

Only she and Jinta were in the shrine, so she dropped her usual stately tone and spoke freely. She grumbled to Jinta, the only person to whom she could vent. Indeed, the chill was still at a bearable level, but come midwinter, the shrine would be terribly cold. Midwinter would be a time of gloom for the shrine maiden stuck in her shrine.

“This shrine worships fire, so they could at least allow a brazier or something...” she grumbled.

“It’d be a problem if a fire broke out, and it’s hard to ventilate this back section. I’m sorry, but you’ll have to go without,” Jinta replied. He knew Byakuya already knew this, of course, but shot down the idea all the same.

Itsukihime’s shrine worshipped the Goddess of Fire, Mahiru-sama. Sadly, the shrine had no windows, so lighting a fire was out of the question. However, the lack of windows also meant the cold winds couldn’t make their way in, so there was some silver lining.

“I know, but the cold’s still unpleasant,” she complained.

“That’s... Well, yeah, I get it.” Jinta himself wasn’t too fond of winter. The cold numbed his hands, making it harder to grip his sword, and his cold-stiff body moved more sluggishly. For a shrine maiden guardian who fought demons, such

factors could be the difference between life and death.

“Are you not going to offer to warm me up yourself?” Byakuya teased.

Flummoxed, Jinta replied, “Wh-what?”

She smiled, sensing she’d flustered him. This was how things were between the two. Since they were little, Jinta was teased by Byakuya, despite being older than her. Their roles were that of Itsukihime and her guardian now, but the power balance between them hadn’t changed one bit.

“He he, you’re still a kid,” she said. She moved over and gently rubbed his head like one would a child’s. The fact that he didn’t stop her was, in a sense, another defeat to his name. “Jeez, Jinta. You can’t do anything without your big sister, can you?”

“I’m older than you, though...” He smiled warmly despite her teasing.

On a night long ago, Byakuya had sworn to become Itsukihime, abandoning her own happiness to instead live for Kadono’s sake. Believing her decision was worthy of respect, Jinta swore to protect it. Years flew by, and now the two were of different status. But they could still be together as they once had.

This is a story of a time when Jinta still took these days for granted, never imagining they would soon come to an end.

It was year ten of the Tenpo Era (1839 AD), winter. Half a year before a certain pair of demons would attack the village.

In the olden days, many inhuman spirits inhabited the mountains. There were demons and Tengu, mountain witches and Hihi monkey spirits. These fiends would attack those who foolishly entered the mountains and would occasionally descend and assault villages. Kadono, one of the many iron towns in the Land of the Rising Sun, was a mountain village, so its residents were well aware that the tales of the supernatural were truth and not mere legend. Consequently, their shrine maiden guardian was tasked with demon hunting. Protecting Itsukihime was but the first of his duties. So, too, was he the protector of the village.

“The Modori River, you say?”

Jinta had been summoned to the shrine to confirm the appearance of one such spirit. In attendance with him on the hardwood floor of the shrine were the village chief and the heads of the blacksmiths and the metallurgists. Beyond the bamboo screen was the current Itsukihime, to whom he listened carefully.

“Yes. While their identity is unknown, we have reason to believe a spirit has made their home in the area around the Modori River.” Her voice was emotionless and soft.

The others began to murmur amongst themselves. The location was more of a concern than the fact that a spirit had appeared. The Modori River was crucial to Kadono. The reason the village could flourish as an iron town at all was because tatara charcoal was easily sourced from the forest and high-quality iron sand could be taken from the Modori River. Without access to the river, Kadono’s chief product, iron, couldn’t be made. This problem had to be resolved quickly, before it affected the village’s well-being.

“Jinta, find out the identity of this spirit. If it threatens Kadono, slay it,” she commanded.

Jinta lowered his head deeply and said, “As you wish. I shall assume my duty as demon hunter.”

Typically, this would be the end of things. This time, however, when he saw that things had come to a conclusion, an older man with a beard—the village chief—spoke up, addressing Itsukihime. “Princess.”

The figure beyond the bamboo screen gave a short nod. Seeing that, the village chief beamed with satisfaction, revealing a smile he seldom showed. “Now then, while we’re at it, there’s something I’d like to discuss with you all.”

He seemed to be in a good mood and spoke fluidly. Jinta wasn’t the only one who was a little perturbed by this—the others murmured quietly amongst themselves. But the village chief continued smoothly, regardless. “The shrine maiden guardian is both guardian to Itsukihime and protector of the village. Since antiquity, it has been custom for the current Itsukihime to choose her own guardian.”

Indeed, the shrine maiden guardian was more than just the Woman of Fire's guardian, they were the village's guardian as well. Hence, while not official, there were a few implicitly understood rules regarding the position. One of these rules was that while Itsukihime had a right to choose her shrine maiden guardian, she couldn't choose just anyone. Being a guardian demanded suitable sword skills, and somebody of ill character simply could not be allowed near the sacred shrine maiden. The say-so of Itsukihime had weight, yes, but if the people of the village were opposed, then her pick could not become her guardian.

There were yet other implicit rules. For example, it was understood that a shrine maiden guardian could not be dismissed at any point. Jinta was Byakuya's shrine maiden guardian. Barring unforeseen circumstances, he would remain her shrine maiden guardian until the role of Itsukihime changed hands. It was also an ancient custom for each Itsukihime to only take one shrine maiden guardian.

The village chief continued. "The current shrine maiden guardian is Jinta. His skill with the sword surpasses even that of his predecessor, Motoharu. He is a shining example of a shrine maiden guardian... However, with the recent famine, we've seen demons grow more rampant. A spirit has even made its home in the area around the Modori River. Who's to say the next spirit won't come for Kadono directly?"

The position of shrine maiden guardian was an honorable one, but it had many conditions. Some of these conditions were illogical and only upheld for the sake of tradition. That illogic was what the village chief spoke up to challenge.

"It has always been the case for Itsukihime to have only one shrine maiden guardian. But in our current situation, isn't that a little unfeasible?"

Itsukihime offered prayers to the village's Goddess, Mahiru-sama. That meant she played a key role as the village's spiritual pillar, yet for some reason only one shrine maiden guardian was ever assigned to Itsukihime. When the shrine maiden guardian had to leave on demon-hunting duties, the men of the village would protect Itsukihime—but was that truly enough to keep her safe?

“This is why I suggest we have another to protect the princess while Jinta is away. Another shrine maiden guardian, that is.”

The others began to murmur with surprise. *Two* shrine maiden guardians? But what of the tradition that had been upheld for so long?

In a bid to forcibly quell any discussion, the village chief beckoned a man to enter the shrine. He said, “This would-be shrine maiden guardian needs no introduction, for he is my very own son, Kiyomasa.”

A handsome young man entered. A wave of confusion spread through the shrine—not because of the young man’s looks but because they and Jinta were very familiar with him. Their little village made for a small world. Everybody knew everyone to some degree, and they all recognized the young man immediately as the village chief’s only son.

He introduced himself with, “I’m Kiyomasa, the newly appointed shrine maiden guardian. I look forward to working with you all, I guess.” He spoke politely but couldn’t fully disguise the insincerity in his voice. Not that anyone would dare reprimand him for it.

Perhaps because he’d had a child later in life, the village chief doted on his son quite a lot—a fact everybody knew. Several of the people present whispered to each other, suspecting the village chief might’ve made his own son shrine maiden guardian as an act of nepotism. The village chief came prepared to dispel those suspicions, however.

“While he hasn’t attained Jinta’s level of mastery, Kiyomasa’s done some training with the sword. It should be more than enough to handle protecting the princess while Jinta’s away demon hunting,” he said. “And of course, this decision wasn’t mine alone. I’ve already obtained the princess’s approval on this matter.”

If Itsukihime gave her approval, then nobody could give a word of disapproval, even if they might still harbor some doubts. To disagree might be taken as a slight against the Woman of Fire herself, and nobody wanted to risk that.

“Isn’t that right, Princess?” the village chief asked.

“...Yes. There has been a rise in vicious spirits lately. We must adapt to the times.”

Jinta tried to read her true feelings from her momentary pause. Perhaps she wasn't so wholly on board with this notion.

“Jinta, do you have any objections?” the village chief asked.

“No. This is to the benefit of the princess,” Jinta answered flatly. He had his doubts but would not voice them. He knew Byakuya must have thought this through. She probably wasn't forced into this by the village chief but had decided that this measure was necessary on her own. With that in mind, he had no choice but to accept her decision.

“Very good. Then the princess and Kadono shall hereby be protected by two shrine maiden guardians.” The village chief nodded in satisfaction. Despite how he doted on his son, he was genuinely devoted to the village. There was no doubt in Jinta's mind that the man was thinking of Byakuya's safety. Jinta wasn't without misgivings—what with tradition being overturned and the village chief choosing his own son and whatnot—but he could accept the decision.

“Ha ha. Let's do our best to get along, eh, Jinta?”

Still, Kiyomasa's mocking gaze bothered him.

Jinta hadn't really talked to Kiyomasa much before. Jinta was an outsider to the village, brought there by Motoharu. While that alone didn't quite explain their lack of contact, there wasn't much else that could.

Still, Jinta had at least seen him before, as a child. It was from the time before Byakuya became Itsukihime, when she still lived as Shirayuki. Their trio always played together: Jinta, Shirayuki, and Suzune. They'd explore the Irazu Forest and cool off in the Modori River, amongst other pursuits. There wasn't much entertainment to be had in the village, but the group found ways to enjoy themselves, nevertheless. Jinta remembered those days even now.

He also remembered how a certain young boy would watch them from a distance.

“Hey, Shirayuki. Who’s that?” he once asked.

“Hm? Oh, that’s the village chief’s kid, Kiyomasa.”

Shirayuki, the daughter of then-Itsukihime Yokaze, recognized the village chief’s son. But Kiyomasa never once called out to their group, only watched them play from a distance. Jinta thought it was somewhat weird but didn’t really care all that much, since the young boy would eventually look away and leave. The only impression Jinta had of the boy was a vague understanding that he would probably be the village chief someday. He never would have expected that boy would one day become the second shrine maiden guardian, upending a long-held tradition.

“A second shrine maiden guardian, huh?” Jinta murmured.

After Kiyomasa introduced himself and the meeting came to an end, Byakuya managed to carve out some time for Jinta and her to be alone, albeit not much time. While she wasn’t all-powerful, being Itsukihime meant that the majority of her requests were granted. She commanded Kiyomasa to go prepare before returning to protect her, granting her and Jinta some time to talk.

All she could do, however, was sigh. She understood that, as Itsukihime, her safety was paramount, but she had hoped her shrine maiden guardian would remain Jinta—and Jinta alone—as tradition dictated. The addition of another shrine maiden guardian into the mix was, while not the nicest way to put it, bothersome.

Jinta wanted to comfort her by saying something along the lines of, “Don’t push yourself,” but he quickly thought better of it. Such words would be of no comfort. She was Itsukihime. She couldn’t change the path she’d chosen after coming this far. For Kadono’s sake, she would happily accept this change, and he understood that.

So instead, he said, “No matter what others might want, I will always be your shrine maiden guardian. I will never let anyone change that.” If she was determined to be Itsukihime, then he was determined to support her as her shrine maiden guardian.

“...Then allow me to match your determination as Itsukihime.” She’d understood the meaning hidden in his blunt words.

Their moment of stiff formality lasted but a moment before they both broke into awkward giggles, grinning at one another.

“I’ll set out as soon as Kiyomasa returns then,” he said.

“All right. Don’t let your guard down, okay? Your big sister would be very sad if you got hurt.”

“How many times do I have to tell you I’m...” He gave up and sighed. “Can’t you just say, ‘stay safe,’ like everyone else?” She always called herself his big sister, despite actually being younger than him, and it was exasperating, but it also warmed his heart somewhat. His body felt lighter after he sighed, so he stood up.

It would be a reach to say he was now free from worry, but what needed protecting had been made all the clearer.

Jinta stopped by his home to prepare for his demon-hunting duties. He was happily welcomed by Suzune.

“Jinta! Welcome home!”

“Hey, Suzune. Anything happen while I was out?”

“Nope!”

Despite her youthful appearance, Suzune was seventeen. Other than Byakuya, Jinta and Suzune had only each other for family.

Seeing her smile so happily at his return pulled at his heart a bit. He didn’t want to rain on her parade, but there was no avoiding it.

“Sorry, I have demon-hunting duties. I’ll be leaving shortly.”

“What...? Again?”

The two were terribly close. Obviously, she worried greatly for his safety. Her face clouded over at the thought of her brother leaving to fight dangerous spirits once again.

Although they’d been through this many times before, Jinta felt just as bad as he always did. It didn’t help that he also knew that Suzune refrained from

begging him to stay for his own sake.

“I’ll be fine,” he said. “The likes of demons won’t do me in.” He tried his hardest to play it tough to ease her worries.

She nodded a bit reluctantly and said, “...Okay. Stay safe though, all right?”

“I will. I’ll be back before you know it, promise.” As he talked, he finished his preparations and made for the entrance.

She saw him off with a proper smile. “Okaaay. I’m sure you’d be much happier if you could just guard the princess all day though, huh, Jinta?” she teased him, trying to end things on a happy note. Her words gave him pause, however. She sensed the change and asked, “What’s wrong?”

It made him feel a bit pathetic that his little sister could see through him so easily. He let out a self-deprecating sigh and said, “Well...”

He had two choices. He could tell her about the new shrine maiden guardian, Kiyomasa—or not. Without much hesitation, he chose the latter.

“Oh, right. I was wondering, do you remember Kiyomasa?” He felt Suzune might not take to the news well, with how fond she was of both him and Byakuya, so he asked a different question.

“Kiyomasa? Who’s that?” she answered.

“The village chief’s son.”

“Huh. I don’t remember him.” She had seen his face and heard his name at least once before, but she hadn’t cared enough to devote him to memory.

“Sorry, weird question,” Jinta said. “I’ll be going now.”

Thinking his sister’s fickle memory was a little adorable, Jinta left with a soft smile. The tension now gone from his shoulders, he made for the Modori River in good spirits. But he never did find anything there.

The role of Itsukihime was passed down through the family bloodline. Yet despite Itsukihime’s important function in the village, no branch families had ever been adopted by the household. Consequently, if an Itsukihime were to

suddenly pass away, there would be no one to fill the gap until the shrine maiden's direct descendant was of reasonable age to take over.

However, historically this had never proved a problem. Throughout the long history of the Itsukihime line, a male had never been born, and most shrine maidens lived long, healthy lives.

In the distant past, branch families had probably been excluded in order to preserve the purity of the sacred household. However, that notion seemed somewhat irrational in the present, especially given the bloodline's current situation. Still, Itsukihime remained sacred. Even if some thought the tradition of keeping the household pure was a little unreasonable, none went so far as to challenge it. As a result, despite the risk of long periods of vacancy as heirs matured, and the very real risk of the bloodline coming to an end, no branch families had been adopted.

So perhaps it was only natural to conclude that the next best option would be to instead increase the number of shrine maiden guardians, who had no direct tie to the Goddess to make them sacred.

"Yo, Jinta. No luck, eh?"

"Afraid not." Jinta returned from the Modori River with nothing to show for it. He had failed to come across the spirit in question and returned to the shrine to make his report. Waiting for him there was the current Itsukihime, Byakuya, and the new shrine maiden guardian, Kiyomasa.

"You wouldn't happen to have been slacking off on the job, would you, eh, Jinta—*sama*?"

"Of course not."

"Really now..."

Even though he stood before the Goddess, Kiyomasa taunted Jinta. Jinta had to wonder what he'd done to earn the man's ill will, since they'd hardly spoken before. Still, he had failed to complete his task. Hiding his irritation, he sat and bowed reverently to the figure beyond the bamboo screen.

"Forgive me, Princess. I failed to find the spirit last night."

She replied, “Not at all. I did not expect this problem to be so quickly resolved in the first place. Haste makes waste, so let’s take our time. Your safety is directly tied to the peace of the village, after all.”

“Thank you for your kind words.”

By Byakuya’s own request, the two typically spoke informally. When it concerned their official duties, however, they only ever spoke as shrine maiden guardian and Itsukihime.

Kiyomasa was a different matter.

“You’re being too easy on him, Byakuya. You gotta properly reprimand him when he mucks things up.” The tone he took was overly familiar. It was certainly no way to talk to someone of her status.

She replied, “Failure is progress in its own way. Your tone, on the other hand, is simply unbecoming for a shrine maiden guardian.”

“Oh c’mon, it’s fine.” Even after being chided, Kiyomasa kept up his impolite tone. He glanced mockingly at Jinta and sniffed.

Perhaps because he was the village chief’s son, or perhaps because she simply understood he wouldn’t budge, Byakuya relented. “...Let’s leave that matter for later. Jinta, you are to investigate the Modori River again. Find the identity of the spirit lingering there.”

“As you wish.”

And so, our story repeats, with Jinta returning to his demon-hunting duties. Though he’d failed to find anything the day before, there was undoubtedly something still lurking in the vicinity of the Modori River that he had to deal with. He had to be patient, however; haste made waste. His first objective was to discover the spirit’s identity, then he could proceed from there. Byakuya’s orders were wise and aligned perfectly with what Jinta himself felt to be correct.

“I leave the shrine in your hands, Kiyomasa,” Jinta said.

“Yeah, yeah. Go break a leg or whatever.”

Jinta also felt it good that Kiyomasa was a shrine maiden guardian. With this,

Byakuya would no longer be defenseless when Jinta left on his demon-hunting duties. The man might act arrogantly towards him, but Jinta could trust him to protect Byakuya.

Jinta had no misgivings. The reason he chose to take up the blade that night, so long ago, still remained inside him. He was glad that which he'd sworn to protect was safer than ever. Yes, he felt some irritation, but he was also pleased to go off and fight without any lingering worries.

"You don't need to worry about a thing, Jinta. I'll keep Byakuya nice and safe for you."

...Really, no lingering worries at all.

At times, rivers were a source of fish, iron sand, and water. At other times, rivers were the cause of mass death by flood. The rivers giveth, and the rivers taketh away. Rivers like the Sanzu River or the River Styx marked the boundary between this world and the next, and it was said that the gods loved to play by riverbanks.

In the old days, rivers were a vital resource for day-to-day life, as well as an important subject of worship. The lives of many, particularly those involved in agriculture, were tied to the condition of rivers. Shrines were often built near rivers so people could pray against flood and drought. The metallurgy-based village of Kadono didn't have such a shrine, but the Modori River was still important for its iron sand. Both the Irazu Forest and the Modori River were necessary for Kadono to function as a village. Consequently, if there was a spirit lurking in the Modori River, it had to be slain.

Jinta left once again to search for the spirit. It was colder by the riverside. The quiet murmuring of flowing water soothed his ears, but he kept a hand on his scabbard at all times. He walked across the stones running parallel to the river, careful to not let his awareness slip. Occasionally, he'd hear the warbling of birdsong. Birds were cautious beasts, though, so perhaps the spirit hadn't settled in their midst. Jinta wondered if he should continue further upstream or expand his search into the forest.

"What to do..." he muttered.

Perhaps talking to himself was a sign of impatience. The Modori River was a lifeline for Kadono, and he had to restore access to it quickly, but all the wishing in the world wouldn't help him find the spirit any sooner. Instead, he let out a sigh, which hung white in the air.

He composed himself and continued on, deciding to go upstream. He walked on pebbles and stepped over boulders as he progressed. The further upstream he went, the thicker the forest to his side became, and the more cliffs with naked tree roots appeared. The rocky ground grew harder to traverse and the visibility diminished. If a spirit were anywhere, it'd be here. If they chose to remain hidden, though, it'd take time to find them. Jinta decided to proceed with caution rather than haste, fully prepared to take a few days to explore if needed.

Or so he told himself. In truth, a nagging, unplaceable sense of impatience tore at him. *Why is that?* he wondered. This wasn't the first spirit to give him so much trouble. He had handled all prior cases with calm, so why was it just this time that he felt so restless? Itsukihime had a new guardian. He should have no reason to worry about her.

His train of thought was immediately cut short when he spotted a branch swaying in the corner of his vision. He glanced sharply at his surroundings, bracing himself to move at any moment. His jumbled thoughts and restless heart cleared the instant he unsheathed his blade. His earlier impatience was gone without a trace. All that could be felt now was his honed spirit and the tense, icy air.

Another branch swayed. He spotted it clearly this time. The leaves, their color dulled with the season, could not fully hide the large shape that leapt from branch to branch.

Unfortunately, Jinta had also clearly been spotted, as the spirit was ogling him with wide eyes. It let out a piercing wail, out of anger, or perhaps trying for intimidation. It kicked off hard enough to snap the branch beneath it and dove at him.

Jinta had no room to counterattack. Left with rocky footing, his options were limited. He chose to advance instead of retreating, matching his timing with the

spirit's strike, parrying it as he took a large, diagonal left step forward.

He successfully avoided the attack, coming away without even a scratch. He had felt the rush of air against his skin as the spirit dove past.

With fresh understanding of his target's strength, Jinta opted to end this quickly. He kicked his left leg back around and slashed horizontally—but only cut through air.

Despite its bulk, the spirit was nimble. By the time Jinta had turned around, it was already more than ten ken away, a distance of a few good leaps.

Jinta scrutinized the figure and murmured to himself, "A monkey spirit...?" The spirit was a monstrous beast with black fur and a red face. It resembled a monkey but was a full head taller than Jinta and glared with unnaturally large eyes. It was clearly no ordinary beast.

Jinta's duty was the same, regardless of what the spirit might be. He would slay it all the same. He might even call this lucky. His target had revealed itself and, instead of fleeing, came right at him. Of course, he wouldn't let his good fortune go to his head. He could tell his enemy was powerful from its first strike alone.

Spurred forward by his sense of duty, Jinta assumed a stance with his sword held horizontally at his side, clad in quiet bloodlust. He was aware of the conventional martial wisdom to limit your moves before your opponent made theirs, but he took this stance anyway. The only thing he needed to focus on now was killing blows.

"Ook, aah!" The spirit snarled as it closed in with a single step. It looked like a monkey and moved with the speed of one, too fast for Jinta to read. It extended a thick arm, likely strong enough to crush Jinta's skull with a single blow. A chill ran down Jinta's spine at the thought, but he didn't stop, swinging his sword straight up at the spirit's outreached arm.

The blade dug into the spirit's defenseless limb, albeit shallowly, and its red face contorted with pain. Taking advantage of the flinch, Jinta side-stepped as he tried to continue his strike diagonally across his target's body. The spirit twisted to avoid him, then retreated, narrowly dodging the tip of Jinta's sword. The way the spirit contorted was sickening, as though it had no bones, and it

could somehow move afterwards without its body stiffening up. Such feats were clearly beyond the realm of what was possible for a human.

Jinta clicked his tongue. “You really must be a monkey, then.”

The mountains were seen as the home of gods and spirits. The freely roaming monkeys were thought to be messengers of the mountain gods, or even the mountain gods themselves. This was because they bore the same shape as humans but were capable of feats impossible to a human, traversing mountains with considerable ease. But as time passed, gods sometimes lost their divinity and became mere spirits. What was once a mountain god might become a Hihi monkey spirit or a Satori mind-reading monkey spirit.

Naturally, that meant monkey spirits were among the most powerful of beast spirits. As though to prove that, the monkey spirit standing before Jinta attacked without hesitation. Its animalistic, flexible muscles and nimbleness gave it a fluidity similar to the footwork found in a human’s martial arts, making its powerful attacks difficult to follow. It took all of Jinta’s focus to keep up.

He wasn’t one to stay on the defensive forever, though. The spirit attacked from above, swinging an arm down. There was hardly any wind-up in its actions, and its supple, flexible arm resembled a whip. Jinta met the attack, aiming for the beast’s palm. He matched his timing with the whip-like arm, combining defense with offense.

With a *whiff*, the air roared. His plan had worked. The spirit’s simple attack was intercepted, and Jinta used the rebound to strike through flesh. But his attack was shallow. The spirit was only injured, and it twisted its body back for a follow-up attack.

Jinta cursed at the spirit mentally and took the blow with his sword. That’s when it grinned scornfully at him. **“You don’t...need to worry...about a thing...”**

“Ngh?!” Jinta had blocked the spirit’s follow-up attack perfectly, but the blow pushed him back. The monster’s strength had risen considerably. Understanding immediately that he couldn’t withstand the blow, he threw his weight backwards and barely escaped with his life.

What was that sudden spike in strength? he wondered. He recognized the spirit’s smirk and words as well. They resembled those of a certain irritating

young man.

The spirit attacked again before Jinta could make sense of things. Its strikes were haphazard but powerful enough to kill, forcing Jinta to focus solely on defending himself. He was managing for now, but he would be dead in an instant if he lost his footing in the slightest. He forced himself to stay calm despite that and thought of nothing but blocking.

But how long could this go on? His sword couldn't endure the punishment forever, even though it was a durable Kadono blade. He had to find a way out of this situation before it was too late, all while not letting his footing slip.

He continued to keep up that delicate balance, blocking lethal blow after lethal blow, only now he scowled in desperate search of an opening. He glared with intense focus, and the spirit glared in return. Jinta's eyes went wide the moment he met the spirit's gaze.

“I'll keep Byakuya...nice and safe...for you.”

This time, beyond a doubt, the beast's face resembled that of Kiyomasa.

Kiyomasa had practiced the sword some, but his skill was nowhere near Jinta's level. He wasn't much for fighting spirits, much less undertaking demon-hunting duties. His role as a shrine maiden guardian only went so far as protecting Itsukihime while Jinta was away.

It begged the question, could someone like him even be called a shrine maiden guardian? Many had their doubts, but of course none spoke out, what with Kiyomasa being the village chief's son.

You don't need to worry about a thing, Jinta. I'll keep Byakuya nice and safe for you—the man's words wouldn't leave Jinta's mind. By all rights, Jinta should be happy about the whole situation. Itsukihime, the pillar of the village, would be better protected while he was gone. Byakuya was a target simply by virtue of being a shrine maiden, as ancient records said the fresh liver of shrine maidens granted immortality. The more people there were to protect her, the merrier.

Do you really believe that?

Logically, he understood that appointing a second shrine maiden guardian was a fine decision. But a voice deep, deep within his heart whispered to him, trying to sway him.

Are you really okay with this? Is that man not an outsider defiling what you have with the woman you love?

The voice was none other than that of the monkey spirit. It targeted the weak, immature Jinta who was hidden underneath the strong, earnest man he had made himself into—a man who could stand as an equal to Byakuya.

Another attack came: a haphazardly lunged arm with thick fingers that could snap a man's neck with ease. The spirit's spread palm was wide enough to cover Jinta's face. Jinta could feel death's fast approach as he, with perfect calm, held his sword against the coming hand.

He felt his blade tear through skin and dig into flesh. Blood seeped through the spirit's wound. Jinta's heart remained still throughout.

He didn't know how the spirit knew of his situation, but it was clear the information was being used to try and unnerve him. Kiyomasa's loathsome face, the fact that another man was by Byakuya—no, Shirayuki's side, all of it was being used to agitate him. He was fighting a spirit that thrived on attacking the gaps in the human heart.

But, so what? Spirits that tried to surprise people through mimicry or deceit had been a dime a dozen since time immemorial. Jinta wasn't so weak that he would lose sight of his objective over some pain or anger. The respect he held for the girl who willingly gave up her own happiness to pray for others couldn't be swayed by the likes of a spirit. He wielded his blade to protect the beauty he saw in her that day—and nothing could hope to change that.

"I suppose you did give me some trouble, though." Jinta dug his left foot into the ground and unleashed a beautiful, flowing upwards strike diagonally across the spirit's body. He felt no envy. No anger, bloodlust, or fear. As though simply going through the motions, his dispassionate blade sliced through the spirit.

Its death throes were short—only a quick, raspy groan. Probably all the life it could muster before dying.

Jinta's blade passed through and, a moment later, the spirit's bisected body hit the ground with a *thud*. With this, his demon-hunting duties were finished. The last moments of the spirit by the Modori River were disappointingly quick.

"...I did kill it, right?" Jinta murmured to himself.

He felt it strange how his sword passed through the spirit's massive body with nearly no resistance. He turned around to examine the spirit's corpse and frowned. Lying atop the pebbles of the riverbank was, indeed, the corpse of a monkey spirit. But it was tiny, no bigger than a normal monkey. It was a far cry from the beast that had attacked him with such savage blows moments before. A white vapor rose from its body as it began to fade away.

While tempting, it was ultimately pointless to apply logic to the likes of spirits. Still, the spirit had used Kiyomasa's face and voice during the fight. Perhaps the spirit made use of illusions? That would explain the body. Maybe the spirit was nothing more than a weak little monkey, only capable of donning a guise to try and spook others.

Regardless of its actual strength, it had been an entity that threatened Kadono. Jinta felt no guilt in taking its life, no emotion so much as flitted across his face. He flicked the blood off his blade and returned it to its scabbard.

The corpse was already gone. After confirming this, Jinta retraced the path he'd taken along the river. He had killed countless spirits before and felt nothing about adding another to the count. The transparent, murmuring river beside him calmed his heart, but the ease he felt also birthed a doubt within him.

What he'd fought was a spirit that used mimicry to worm its way into one's heart. He'd managed to defeat it without fully understanding its true nature and come out unscathed—but that might not have been the case if the spirit were more cunning. What would have happened if the spirit had taken the image of Byakuya or Suzune? Would he still have been able to kill it without hesitation?

As soon as he asked himself that, he realized the reverse was also problematic: Was he able to kill the spirit without hesitation *because* it took the image of Kiyomasa?

Which was it then? Did he kill without hesitation because it was a monkey spirit, or did he kill without hesitation because he saw Kiyomasa? If it was the former, then end of story. But if it was the latter...

No clear-cut answer came to Jinta as he walked. Eventually, the village came into sight, and the unnamable emotion tearing him up inside faded away without any proper resolution. He just needed to think about giving his report. Then this would all draw to a close, as it had numerous times before and would numerous times in the future.

The village chief and the other influential figures of the village were summoned to the shrine as usual. Kiyomasa was there too. This would be the new normal from here on out.

“You’ve completed your duties. Well done,” Byakuya said. The spirit might not have been much of a real threat in the end, but it was one less spirit in the vicinity regardless.

The men praised him as well, saying things like, “That’s our shrine maiden guardian for ya,” and, “Jinta ain’t Kadono’s best swordsman for nothing!” Jinta wasn’t the type to let praise go to his head, but he did feel some sense of accomplishment in bringing the villagers peace.

“Well done, Jinta,” the village chief said, before needlessly adding, “It’s good you can now fight without worrying about the princess. It seems adding another shrine maiden guardian was the right decision after all.”

He seemed to imply that some of Jinta’s success was thanks to Kiyomasa. Certainly, Kiyomasa had stood guard over Byakuya in Jinta’s absence. That didn’t mean Jinta approved of Kiyomasa receiving indirect credit. “Well...” he began.

“Yes?” the village chief asked.

“...No, it’s nothing.” He thought better of saying anything. It was in Itsukihime’s best interests to have more protection. To voice his disapproval of Kiyomasa’s presence would go against his vow to protect her.

“...Very well then. Let us continue with these roles from now on as well,” the village chief said.

For his home, his family, and the promises they made as Itsukihime and shrine maiden guardian, Jinta could put his personal feelings aside.

“Your fidelity is appreciated,” Byakuya said to Jinta. It was the same for her as well, most definitely. She held that starry night too dear to turn back now.

The two of them prioritized the life they’d chosen over their feelings for one another. Even after coming face-to-face with his own jealousy, Jinta wouldn’t deviate from his path. But perhaps neither of them could change their path from the start.

“Jinta, continue to serve Kadono as you have.”

“With pleasure.”

Their fates may have been set in stone that very night when they swore their promise under the stars—not that they could have known that. Only the gods could know the future.

Regardless, this was the story of how a long-held tradition was overturned and the current Itsukihime came to have two shrine maiden guardians.

It was year ten of the Tenpo Era (1839 AD), winter. A time when happy days continued with no end in sight. Half a year before that end arrived.

Footnotes

- [1.](#) An old Japanese unit of measurement. One shaku is equal to 0.9942 feet.
- [2.](#) An old Japanese unit of measurement. One sun is equal to 1.193 inches.
- [3.](#) An old Japanese unit of measurement. One ri is equal to 2.440 miles.
- [4.](#) In Japanese, the kanji letters that make up names can have different readings. The “Shira (白)” part of Shirayuki becomes “Byaku (白)” in Byakuya.
- [5.](#) An old Japanese unit of measurement. One ken is equal to six shaku.
- [6.](#) Yamanba is a fashion sub-culture that exists in modern-day Japan that bears little resemblance to the yamanba mountain witches from which the term originated.
- [7.](#) In Japanese, the same kanji character can be read in different ways. In this instance, the kanji for night can be read as either "yo" or "ya".



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